University of Alberta

Mina Loy:
The Language of the Body, The Language of Attack

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Mina Loy: The Language of the Body, The Language of Attack,* submitted by Leslie Anne Vermeer in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Mina Loy remains one of the least-known Modernist writers, although her peers believed she contributed great and lasting influence and significance. The qualities that made Loy an exceptional figure in Modernism--uncompromising diction, aggressive typography, and radical subject matter--have largely obscured her real accomplishment for later audiences. Loy's commitment to social change through both an avant-garde art praxis and a vocal sexual revolution has left her isolated: without a home in the avant-garde and with few champions in either the feminist or literary communities.

This thesis argues Loy's eclipse is about to end. It examines her work from the perspectives of Futurism, feminism, and female sexuality, and argues Loy's language of attack was an avant-garde strategy to push women's sexuality into revolutionary social praxis. It concludes Loy is now poised to receive the critical and cultural recognition she deserves as one of Modernism's true revolutionaries.

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My body seems to reject ordinary language.
If I can find the language of the body, I can find where sex is lying.

Kathy Acker, "The Language of the Body"

...Are you prepared for the WRENCH?

Mina Loy, "Feminist Manifesto"

Mina Loy is, for those who have read her, a genius without apology. "Poet, playwright, painter, sculptor, model and commercially successful fashion designer, Loy was one of the major figures in both literature and the visual arts", one critic optimistically writes (Women Poets 497). Her hard, sparse, irascible verse suggests a writer far ahead of her time.

Acknowledged by specialists to be an exceptionally important Modernist, Loy was expected by her peers to be lastingly famous.[1] Yet in 1997 Loy is almost unknown—and, surprisingly, is not a canonical Modernist. Her name is often dropped in university seminars either to the dull silence of non-recognition or to anxious squirming (usually from students who have already encountered her "difficult" poetry).[2] She is usually discussed in scholarly reconstructions of the Modernist era as an obscure figure, wrapped in an aura of importance only rarely supported by familiarity with her texts.[3]

She is a lost Modernist, perhaps the most lost of the "Lost Generation". Such a fate is hardly unusual: one need only flip through any of the numerous "little magazines" of high Modernism (*The Egoist*, *The Little Review*, *TransAtlantic Review*, *Transition*, *Others*, *Poetry*, etc., etc.) to discover the dozens of minor writers whose work has left no lasting impression upon twentieth-century literature. Loy also peeps out of dozens of

Modernist memoirs, surrounded by her young daughters, tossing off some witty remark, writing "dirty" poetry, glowing radiantly, watching ironically from the periphery of the expatriate community. Mina Loy's is one of the many names dropped carelessly through the memoirs of the period—like now-obscure figures such as Bob Brown, William Bird, Michael Arlen, Solita Solano and so many, many others.

Yet we might ask why Mina Loy has not experienced the recovery so many of her long-ago friends and acquaintances have undergone toward the close of this century, as feminism reclaims its lost women geniuses and postmodernism pokes cynically at the Modernists for a fragmentary heritage. Virginia Kouidis' biography of Loy in the 1970s did not stir renewed interest in Loy's work as similar biographies of Modernist figures have done, much as the late 1950s publication of *The Lunar Baedeker and Time Tables* drew only vague attention. Could this indifference be blamed on a lack of receptivity for women as artists within struggling literary feminism?

The publication of two works in the 1980s, when the study of women's literature was an established stream within the discipline of English, should have secured Mina's recovery. In 1986, Shari Benstock published *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. In Benstock's survey of some two dozen important Left Bank personalities, Mina

is mentioned repeatedly--as a visitor at the salons, as one of Robert McAlmon's projects, and as a close friend of Djuna Barnes, Gertrude Stein, and others. Yet Benstock fails to recover Loy satisfactorily, claiming "...Loy's work was nonetheless unknown to later readers. Indeed, she was lost before she had ever been discovered, perhaps for the absence of published work by Loy between 1931 and 1944" (386). Yet a small oeuvre is no reason for obscurity--as Hemingway remarks of expatriate icon F. Scott Fitzgerald:

> He wrote two very good books and one which was not completed which those who know his writing best say would have been very good. He also wrote some good short stories (192).

Fitzgerald wears the aura of "the Roaring Twenties", and his reputation is transmitted as much by this aura as by his oeuvre. Why not so for Mina Loy? Perhaps because Fitzgerald is a novelist whose prose is stunning and whose stories have "universal" themes; Loy is "only" a woman poet who lost "her good name" writing about sex and women's bodies.[4]

In 1987, Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers published *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940*. This book surveys the network of experimental women writers of London, Paris, and America who underwrote the Modernist enterprise with their labour, money and artistry. As the book cover proudly proclaims,

> The roster of women discussed in *Writing for Their Lives* includes Margaret Anderson, Djuna Barnes, Sylvia Beach, Bryher, Mary Butts, H.D., Amy Lowell, Mina Loy, Dora Marsden, Harriet Monroe, Marianne Moore, Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, and Harriet Weaver (back cover).

Most of these names are well known to scholars of the Modernist period, and much has been written about most of these women—a great deal, indeed, about some of them. Yet, interestingly, the subjects of Chapter Eight—Mina Loy and Mary Butts—have remained obscure.[5] The reason for this continuing obscurity is not as simple as class boundaries, material wealth, sexuality, patronage, nor even talent (if any of these reasons can be said to be simple); indeed, as I will argue, Loy's (and Butts') minor status in literature today has more to do with audience receptivity, scholarly fashion and ideology politics than anything else.

Loy does not live comfortably among the Modernists. Neither a high Modernist nor an avowed avant-gardist, she disliked "schools" and remained no one's disciple for long. Loy was literally embattled with the literary establishment and its champions—one reason, perhaps, that she was gradually lost from the Modernist canon.

Loy wrote at a critical moment in English literary history, a moment when the revolutionary impulse of the avant-garde contested the conservative forces of tradition; in its subjects, its violence, its readership

and its accomplishment, her writing reveals and provokes this crisis. Thus, this thesis has two overall goals: first, to explore the political accomplishment of Loy's poetry, under the auspices of Futurism, feminism and female sexuality; and second, to use these themes to consider why Loy appears to be only a minor literary figure today.[6] My thesis, which will reconstruct Loy as a sex radical and avant-garde agitator, seeks to restore Loy to her position as a "genius".

This thesis is written in a moment of immense potential. In 1996, two important works were published to assist in the recovery of Mina Loy. The first is Carolyn Burke's extensive biography *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*, a careful reconstruction of Loy's life that persistently reconfigures the image of Loy in Modernism. The second is *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, a selection of Loy's prose and poetry which Conover proposes as a guidebook "we should take with us as we navigate our way toward the next century" (Lost xx). A significant renewal in interest is also promised by the forthcoming volume *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, a selection of essays on Loy edited by Keith Tuma and Maeera Shreiber. The publication of these three new volumes, as well as an increasing number of individual articles and graduate theses on Loy, suggests that,

perhaps, Loy is at last receiving the favourable critical attention so long owed her.

What was the context of "Modernism" when Mina Loy began writing? Mina's first poems were published in 1914. English literary Modernism was a few years behind such continental movements as Symbolism and Expressionism. Its "official" origin was either in 1909 by T.E. Hulme, F.S. Flint et al. (the Eiffel Tower group) or in 1912 by Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington and H.D. (the tea-shop group).[7] Perhaps Anglo-American Modernism (as it has come to be known, recognizing the crucial contribution of many American expatriates) begins with the March 1913 publication of "Imagisme" (Flint) and "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (Pound) in Harriet Monroe's Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine. Whatever its genesis, in 1914 English poetry was just beginning to experience a true revolution. Modernism was a formally provocative enterprise, distinguished from the voluptuous languor of late nineteenth century forms by its increased vitality, freshness, spareness, and activity. Yet, Modernism's initial departures from poetic tradition were rather innocuous, almost hesitant, as these examples of early Imagist poems suggest:

> I am weary with love, and thy lips
> Are night-born poppies.
> Give me therefore thy lips

That I may know sleep (Skipwith Cannell, Imagist Poetry 59);

Thou art come at length
More beautiful
Than any cool god (H.D., Imagist Poetry 63);

Now that I have cooled to you
Let there be gold of tarnished masonry,
Temples soothed by the sun to ruin
That sleep utterly (William Carlos Williams, Imagist Poetry 99);

I have sat here happy in the gardens,
Watching the still pool and the reeds
And the dark clouds
Which the wind of the upper air
Tore like the green leafy boughs
Of the divers-hued trees of late summer
(Richard Aldington, Imagist Poetry 53).

Despite these gentle beginnings, many critics responded to the Imagist movement with outrage and contempt—recall such "rhetoric nearing violence" as Professor William Ellery Leonard's inflammatory statement:

> Imagists, doubtless, hear things more wonderful than Beethoven's symphonies in the buzz of the mosquito on the flats back of Chicago, and they whiff more than all the perfumes of Arabia in the summer steam of a Jersey dunghill (Imagist Poetry 35).

If this was Professor Leonard's response to the first tentatives of Modernism, what would he have made of Mina Loy when she spoke?

I am the centre
Of a circle of pain
Exceeding its boundaries in every direction

The business of the bland sun
Has no affair with me

In my congested cosmos of agony
From which there is no escape
On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations
Or in contraction
To the pin-point nucleus of being... (Last 6).[8]

The difference between Loy and the "avant-garde" Imagists is enormous. The early Modernists were experimental, but Loy was truly revolutionary. She brought a radical political agenda to her art and tried to make poetry relevant to lived lives. Love poetry, for example, had been written for centuries, but no-one had ever written the poetry of giving birth, particularly not from the perspective of the opening uterus. From the very beginning, Mina Loy was a rebel, a radical who said what no-one else dared, who wrote in formally challenging and linguistically provoking idiom, who translated the battle of the sexes through the (first) war of the world. She took violence to English to write the language of the female body, words never before uttered by a woman in print. Situated in the context of Futurism, maintaining strong (if not entirely orthodox) feminist views, and living the praxis of her poetry through her body, Loy threw every kind of challenge at the almost exclusively male establishment of English literary culture in the 1910s. Her poetry voices a politics which is, even today, in 1997, too radical for most of us to understand.

In one of her earliest works, Loy was already working out her radical ideas through literature. "The

Prototype" is a prose poem that "rings with messianic socialism"; its organization "depends on the contradiction between religious ideals and social realities on which much of Mina's poetry, as well as her art, would be structured" (Life 158). "To preach a more democratic gospel, she told herself and potential readers, institutions like the Church had to be reinvented, and new forms of expression had to be forged" (Life 159). Loy gradually realized exactly how to forge (in every nuanced sense) these new forms, which gave her revolutionary potential, and soon applied her new "democratized gospel" to an intensely subjugated citizenry: women.

Loy's is a literature whose text is scored upon the woman's body, whose syllables may be shouted, sung, cried, gurgled, hissed, spat, shrieked, but never whispered; it is the script of untold performances, the lines of labour, lust, blood, bread and a thousand daily deaths. It is a manifesto of empowerment, a soliloquy of the sexed female being realized. Loy's writing is an aggressive political challenge to the anxious male matrix of Modernism.

Loy's contemporaries included Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein. Pound appreciated Loy's idiosyncratic, provocative writing, which he characterized as "logopoeia or poetry

that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters" (Gender of Modernism 366).[9] Pound undertook stylistically similar (although conceptually very different) experiments in his later work; Loy, and the Futurists at large, had a strong influence on both Pound and Williams. Williams, says Carolyn Burke, "...learned from [Loy's] unusual spacing, typography, and disdain for punctuation and connectives" (Gender of Modernism 233).[10] Loy shares her exotic, highly intellectual diction and her dry irony with Marianne Moore, but Moore was a much more prudish poet who never attempted the kind of graphic bawdiness Loy wrote about.[11] Through Mabel Dodge, Loy met Gertrude Stein in Florence in 1910. A strong friendship developed between them, and Loy read some of Stein's earliest works.[12] There is actually great complementarity between these two poets, and, interestingly, they are both especially "difficult" Modernists whose works are only slowly being rediscovered today.

The connection between Loy and Stein runs quite deep. It is fair to say Stein influenced Loy much more than Loy influenced Stein, and Loy recognized the debt. Loy wrote two tributes to Stein, one in prose, one in verse, both called "Gertrude Stein". These pieces show an

adept comprehension and warm appreciation of Stein's playful experiments with language.

In the poem "Gertrude Stein", Loy captures Stein "crush[ing] the tonnage of consciousness". Loy, who wished so desperately for a language of immediacy not weighed down by centuries of acquired connotation, found Stein's fresh, clean language invigorating and inspiring: "...such fresh significance to her words, as if she had got them out of bed early in the morning and washed them in the sun" (Last 292). Loy believe Stein could discover "the radium of the word", a project that doubtlessly urged Loy to her own linguistic laboratory. What we read today is the outcome of Loy's experimentation.

If Stein so heavily influenced Loy, and Loy in turn influenced Williams, Pound, and Eliot (who grudgingly respected Loy's writing, although he criticized that her oeuvre was too small), a very different genealogy of Modernism develops. Rather than Eliot's anxious poetry of inheritance and conservative containment, we see Loy and Stein strongly, freely bursting into the new era, "making it new" from the previously untapped resources of the female imagination.

In recreating her early introduction to Stein's prose, Loy writes, "The core of a 'Being' was revealed to me with uninterrupted insistence....And the innate tempo of a life poured in alert refreshment upon my mentality"

(Last 289). Stein's writing opened for Loy the opportunity to observe as minutely in words as she had in art: Stein showed Loy in written lines what the Futurist painters showed her in graphic lines—the continuous enactment of being, dynamic living. "In Gertrude Stein life is never detached from Life; it spreads tenuous and vibrational between each of its human exteriorization and the other", Loy continues, sensing the pulse that animates Stein's prose: interconnectivity and life.

Truly living was an important theme in Loy's life. She had grown up feeling strangled by expectation, smothered by tradition, crushed by conventionality.[13] Stein's prose—and later, the Futurists' energies—gave Mina the impulse to reject the received (in literature, in society and in her personal life) and embrace an endlessly escaping tomorrow. Stein revealed to Loy "the sanctuary of pure expression" (Last 292), where the strangely idealistic Loy would be perfectly at home.

Language was a tension-point in Modernism.[14] Language could either invoke tradition or dissociate from it—could either alienate the reader from the work or engage the reader in its artistic praxis. More than any other literary form, poetry depends on language: its crispness, its resilience, its cutting edge, its poignancy. The Imagists had embraced the image, and the image was potent. But Loy, a painter, could do more.

Using her Futurist training, she could compress the potency of the image into a single word, merely by juxtaposing it against another in a surprising or startling way. She effected associative communication, much as Stein did, but at a much more basic level. Stein's interest in psychology and the mind led her to experiment with words in play. Loy's interest led her to take up words as weapons, literally: she writes as a woman, wielding a Wrench, in truly avant-garde fashion.[15]

This activation might explain Loy's defection from Futurism as well. Loy realized it was not necessary to blow up the human body, or even human institutions, when all she had to do was blow people's minds. The words would do the work. The mind could liberate the body, as Loy proposes in her manifestos (particularly the later "Psycho-Democracy") as well as in her thinking-woman's poetry. Thus, her early critics were right: Loy's poetry is extremely intellectual. It is also extremely corporeal, and it was upon the landscape of the body that she waged her war for sexual, social and personal freedom. Loy's weapon of choice was the Wrench.

Chapter One - A Revolutionary Potential: Mina as Futurist

Mina's first awakening occurred in 1913 in Florence when she discovered the Italian Futurists. Mina was immediately attracted both to the dynamics of the movement and to the charisma of its leader. Futurism extended a promise of liberation, both through its vigorous renunciation of the past and its traditions and through its aggressive poetics of the new. Loy eventually broke from Futurism (and is no longer identified as a Futurist in histories of the movement); her reasons for doing so will form the backbone of this chapter. However, Loy also took much from Futurism that enabled her to develop a political poetics of female sexuality, which she used to make her violent attack on convention, society, and tradition.

Futurism arose in Italy under F.T. Marinetti's leadership. Marinetti's "Le Futurisme" ("Futurist Manifesto") was first published in February 1909 in the French periodical *Le Figaro* and declared:

> We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicoloured, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedily railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose

> propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd (Marinetti 42).

The manifesto provoked an immediate, intense response. It was quickly published in Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Russian in small papers, magazines, pamphlets, and handbills, provoking a movement that "exploded all over Europe in a series of exhibitions, proclamations, and performances" (Life 151).[1] Marinetti's words spoke to the social and political tensions of capitalism emerging in newly industrialized European countries, and the movement often traded on the erotic charge of its overt violence:

> We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. ... Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap. (Marinetti 41)

As Burke points out, "the Futurists were responding to the becalmed situation of European culture in the 1900s, when cultivated people claimed to abhor modernity..." (Life 151). The movement was enormously attractive, particularly to members of the impoverished underclasses, for whom late Victorian capitalism had offered only the exploitative drudgery of wage labour. Futurism offered art as an easy avenue to excitement, mobility, revolution and power. For Loy, a painter frustrated by nineteenth-

century studio techniques and the daughter of class-bound English parents, Futurism's promise was enchanting.[2]

The Futurists absolutely rejected tradition (although they embraced national history as patriotism) and constantly sought the new, whether it be artistic forms, philosophy, politics, or morality. "In the field of culture, they were revolutionaries", claims Burke (Life 152). Futurist principles first applied to literature but were quickly taken up by the visual arts, and eventually spread to other expressive forms such as music, dance, theatre, film, fashion, and architecture.[3] It was earnestly, if not always successfully, a multi-disciplinary movement, and a surprising number of women participated in it besides Loy, including Rosa Rosa, Alexandra Exter, Olga Rozanova and Valentine de Saint-Point, among others.[4] The opportunity to join such a comprehensive program for social change was attractive to men and women alike:

> What set the futurists off from the other circles of militant ideologues and artists was their total rejection of tradition, their cohesive organization and collective identity as a movement driven by an all-encompassing project, and their concerted efforts to master the multifarious challenges of modernization (Blum 19).

Yet Futurism was, from its inception, aggressively masculinist: pro-patriotism, pro-militarism, pro-pugilism. Kozloff argues the Futurists "embraced the spectacle of social conflict as a paramount symbol of

their own desire for power" (122), but he neglects the distinctly gendered nature of this conflict. "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women," Marinetti wrote provocatively in the manifesto (Marinetti 15). "Scorn" was theoretically reserved for the concept or construct of "Woman", as Blum explains:

> In her degraded role, woman stands both for nature and for society; more specifically, she stands for the unruliness of nature and the ruling vulgarity of a materialistic, utilitarian society in a world without transcendent values (9);[5]

but the theoretical tended to leak into everyday practice. Burke notes,

> When Mina objected to his *disprezzo della donna* (scorn for women), [Marinetti] claimed that by this slogan he intended a critique of bourgeois culture, which depicted women as *femmes fatales* or madonnas and turned art into a corrupt posturing before an effeminate ideal. His scorn was directed not at individual women, he explained, but at woman conceived "as the divine reservoir of *Amore*" (Life 156).

Loy's relationship with Marinetti, recreated in Loy's unpublished roman à clef *Brontolivido*, is troubled by sexist positioning and bravado on Marinetti's part and by role-play and submission on Loy's part.[6] Subsequent events in Marinetti's political life, beyond the scope of this thesis, suggest we are correct to suspect Marinetti's program of misogyny.

Even before World War I, Futurism was often ragingly proto-fascist:

> Calling for the radical liquidation of tradition and celebrating visionary intuition, vitality, dynamism, violence, and virility, the movement responded to the challenge of the modern age by constructing a fiction of the individual's power vis-a-vis the world—a modern myth for reimposing symbolic control on a world without absolutes, in which power seemed to have become the only measure of the self and the subjective imagination the only measure of reality (Blum 17).

With its love of speed, danger, abrupt change and force, Futurism was a violent response to traditional artistic philosophies:

> ...the Futurists devised a carnival of provocation. Traveling shows, foreign newspaper reviews, and dealers' cartels were ordinary-enough features of contemporary art life. The Futurists improved upon them by broadsides and pamphlets, preliminary literary barrages to soften up the intellectual ground, street demonstrations, theatre evenings (*serata*), press conferences and releases, magazine polemics, lectures, and fiery catalogue introductions (Kozloff 120).

Marinetti was heavily influenced by Apollinaire and the French Symbolists, but he decried "art for art's sake". An important principle of Futurism was the de-institutionalization of art. Such limitations as medium or genre were artificial impositions upon creativity and freedom, much as laws, conformity, and tradition limited human being. Art was perceived as a vehicle for radical, wrenching social change; its viewers and patrons could

not help but be caught up in the whirling Futurist machine:

> ...[the Futurists] derived their psychic income by contending with [the audience] on three levels: exalting a demonic future in which the conditions of life are regulated as if by a pressure cooker; sowing bodily confusion and mental alarm in the present; and belabouring and vilifying the cultural geography of the past (Kozloff 123).

The Futurists achieved impact by violently disrupting their viewers' security. They insisted upon the destruction of tradition and sentimentality, which they saw as "passatista", and yet, according to Blum,

> ...futurism combines a penchant for outrageous utopian visions with a persistent interest in the practical, efficient aspects of modern life (18).

At its most optimistic, Futurism tried to effect revolutionary social change through its artistic praxis. Thus, Futurism in Italy was—if for a moment only—a true avant-garde movement.[7]

The original Futurist manifesto's importance to the development of avant-garde art movements in Europe cannot be underestimated:

> Le manifeste de fondation du futurisme a eu une influence prépondérante sur tous les mouvements d'avant-garde du XXe siècle. A partir de 1909, nul artiste ne pouvait essayer de se démarquer des mouvements préexistants sans se référer ouvertement ou implicitement au texte du premier manifeste du futurisme. Qu'il ait été suivi par les manifestes d'autres écoles n'enleve rien a la valeur révolutionnaire de ce texte (de Villers 13).

Futurism was a manifesto-based movement. Marinetti was the primary leader and the most conspicuous writer of the movement, but numerous manifestos were composed by diverse writers on a broad array of topics. Marinetti extensively coached other artists how to write an effective manifesto. Marjorie Perloff argues Marinetti actually developed a new literary genre of manifesto-writing with his directions, requiring "de la violence et de la précision" (81); elsewhere she suggests Pound's exposure to Marinetti and, in particular, Marinetti's Futurist writing style formed the stylistic basis for the prose/poem configuration and rhythms of the *Cantos*.[8]

Although initially a literary movement (Marinetti was a poet as well as manifesto-writer), Futurism was quickly taken up by several young Italian painters, most notably Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà. Many Russian painters were strongly influenced by a blended "cubist-futurism". Futurism in France laid the roots for Dada and Surrealism. As Kozloff notes, "*Futurism established itself as the most aggressive artistic phenomenon of its age in the least amount of time and on the widest possible international front*" (118; italics his). Futurist art is characterized by multiple planes of vision, long lines, geometric structures, and the body rendered machine. Geometry, machinery, mechanics, speed, and dynamicism are the subjects of Futurism's

fascination. Futurist technique is similar to cubism, but much more dynamic. Futurist painting articulates the tension of minute movements in an essentially static moment, much as successive frames of film convey when overlaid:

> several of Carrà's studies of running horses present, literally, that image of a many-legged animal shaped to fit a triangle composition. The best-known exercise in this manner is Balla's "Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash," showing the torso of a little black dog with a flurry of blurred feet beneath, many wagging tails behind, and a shining chain leash filling the air with whirling patterns above (Wees 90-91).[9]

Futurist literature, particularly Futurist poetry, is characterized by similar techniques. Futurist poetics demand a violent rejection of impressionism and the extreme compression and dynamism of the image. But, as Burke points out, this technique attempts to leap from art into life: "dynamism...proclaimed the Futurists' desire to participate in, and to shape, the limitless world unfolding before their eyes" (Life 153), a form of poetics transforming into life praxis. For example, language is reduced to its essential components; punctuation, articles, adverbs, inflected verbs, prepositions and conjunction are reduced or eliminated from poetry. Such strategies are intended to destroy the artificiality of literary conventions, rendering the artistic production of the text a cooperative social communication between writer and reader. Discussing

Marinetti's 1913/4 "performance poem" "Zang Tumb Tuuum", Perloff notes:

> ...[it] exemplifies most of the features advocated in Marinetti's manifestos: no punctuation or verse form, no finite verbs, adjectives replaced by compound nouns..., conjunctions replaced by mathematical symbols (+), heavy oversize black type used for emphasis (**"ZANG-TUMB-TUMB"**), phonetic spelling (**"uuuuuuuuurlaaaaare"** and **"crrrrrrrrrrrepitare"**), onomatopoeia (**"tatatata"**), and so on (Perloff 59).

Loy employed similar strategies, but turned Marinetti's defiance to her own uses, as Burke notes in her discussion of Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism":

> Loy adapted elements of Marinetti's "arte di far manifesti"—the inventive typography, bold layout, and attention-getting aphorisms—to her own uses: taken as a groups, her aphorisms enact the compression, expansion, and release of a mind in search of psychic liberation (Gender of Modernism 232).

Such is the avant-garde praxis of Loy's writing: she invites the reader to participate in her personal liberation at the same moment as she directs the reader how to experience her own "realized self" (Lost 152).[10] This simultaneous speaking to the self and the reader breaks down "the antithesis between producer and recipient" (Bürger 53), drawing the experience of the woman artist into social praxis—for the first time.

Onomatopoeia and visual syllables are also characteristic features of Futurist poetry, although

onomatopoeia for Marinetti does not mean what we may expect:

> Onomatopoeia that vivifies lyricism with crude and brutal elements of reality was used in poetry... more or less timidly. We Futurists initiate the constant, audacious use of onomatopoeia. ...I propose... a swift, brutal, and immediate lyricism, a lyricism that must seem anti-poetic to all our predecessors, a telegraphic lyricism with no taste of life. Beyond that the bold introduction of onomatopoetic harmonies to render all the sounds and noises of modern life, even the most cacophonic (Marinetti 104).

Loy would adopt such tactics in creating texts that wheeze, groan, moan, roar, and snap...sounds of both the cityscape and the female body. Her pages were as aurally interesting as they were visually provocative.

Visual presentation of the text on the page was another concern of Futurist aesthetics, and Futurist typography was as aggressive as its philosophy. "Wildly different typefaces and sizes jostled each other, phrases ran in all directions, and boldface headlines caught one's attention. Treated this way, words all but jumped off the page" (Life 160).[11] Futurist typography made the composition of the page a political statement where it had once been "the task of creative non-interference" with "a kind of statuesque transparency" (Bringhurst 17, 19).[12] It was vibrant, jarring, aggressive, radical. Marinetti described Futurist typography as

> a typographical revolution aimed at the bestial, nauseating idea of the book as passeist.... The book

> must be the Futurist expression of one Futurist thought. Not only that. My revolution is aimed at the so-called typographical harmony of the page, which is contrary to the flux and reflux, the leaps and bursts of style that run through the page. On the same page, therefore, we will use three or four colours of ink, or even twenty different typefaces if necessary. For example: italics for a series of similar or swift sensations, boldface for the violent onomatopoeias, and so on. With this typographical revolution and this multi-coloured variety in the letters I mean to redouble the expressive force of words. ... I want to grasp them brutally and hurl them in the reader's face (106).

Marinetti obviously recognized and employed the impact of presentation upon the reader. Loy attempted to exploit these techniques in her writings, particularly in the presentation of the "Feminist Manifesto".[13]

Loy's first manifesto, "Aphorisms on Futurism", is an interestingly positive twist on the aggressive impulses of revolutionary militarism; it is also the nearest statement of her own poetics she ever wrote. "Energized by Marinetti's assault on language and freed, to some extent, of her subservience to villadom, [Mina] attempted a number of prose and poetic forms, including rhymed verse, prose poetry, aphoristic statement, and an idiosyncratic version of Marinetti's favourite genre, the manifesto....Although she could not quite accept the all-out warfare prescribed by Marinetti, these pointed aphorisms on psychic liberation ring with his defiance" (Life 158-160). The "psychic liberation" Loy sought came out of a moment of personal crisis.[14] In 1913, Mina was

engaged in an agonizing flirtation with Giovanni Papini, charmed by the antics of Marinetti ("one of the most theatrical people Mina had ever met"), outraged (but also released) by her husband Stephen's casual infidelities, and intrigued by Mabel Dodge's multiple liaisons; but she found herself unable or unwilling to act upon her impulses. Mina's sexuality, creativity, and personal freedom were bound up by a sense of convention and propriety she had battled for years. The "Aphorisms" show Mina beginning to challenge the barriers that had censored her thoughts and actions for so long:

> THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions.
>
> LIFE is only limited by our prejudices. Destroy them, and you cease to be at the mercy of yourself (Lost 150).

The "Aphorisms" work at both a personal and political level toward emancipation. Futurism, with its loathing of tradition and its utopic yearning for drastic change, offered Loy the chance to break violently out of the prison of the past. She took up the challenge boldly, declaring:

> THE Futurist must leap from affirmative to affirmative, ignoring intermittent negations—must spring from stepping-stone to stone of creative exploration; without slipping back into the turbid stream of accepted facts (Lost 150).

It is both to the reader and to herself that she speaks when she announces:

> HERE are the fallow-lands of mental spatiality that Futurism will clear—
>
> MAKING place for whatever you are brave enough, beautiful enough to draw out of the realized self.
>
> TO your blushing we shout the obscenities, we scream the blasphemies, that you, being weak, whisper alone in the dark.
>
> THEY are empty except of your shame (Lost 152).

The aphorisms are an extraordinary gesture of emancipation of the "realized" self, the foundation from which Loy would launch her radical poetic enterprise.

Loy's second manifesto (unpublished during her lifetime) was a "Feminist Manifesto", composed around 1915 and scathingly critical not only of the dismissive sexual politics of Futurism but also of the vaguely liberal middle-class desires of English feminism.[15] Here she exhorts: "Leave off looking to men to find out what you are *not*. Seek within yourselves to find out what you *are*." Although stylistically this work conforms to Marinetti's prescriptions for manifesto-writing, the "Feminist Manifesto" reveals a powerful protest against the limitations of the movements (Futurism and feminism) that inform it.[16]

By 1914 Loy had openly declared her alliance with the Futurists. Loy's first published poems, written in a style heavily informed by Futurist aesthetics, were

published in *Camera Work* (Stieglitz) and *Trend* (Carl Van Vechten) this same year. Loy was a studio-trained artist who had no training or education as a writer. But the Futurists believed "artistic talent was not necessarily limited to those with academic training, and that a fresh and natural vision was likely to rise from the untutored and unspoiled" (Kozloff 122). Mina's decision to turn to writing, then, could be interpreted as a seeking of the "natural vision", which she turned, of course, to both personal and political ends. More poems appeared in 1915, most notably in *Others* magazine, where the notorious "Love Songs" were published.

The Futurists, and Marinetti in particular, impressed Loy with the revolutionary potential of words. Burke recounts one *serata* at which this power was clearly demonstrated:

> ...the discussion turned to Papini's latest diatribe in *Lacerba*, a bitter, almost hysterical call for the suppression of women. Marinetti seized the occasion to harangue the group on the difference between Futurist obscenity and Papini's foray into the genre. Papini had reduced woman to her sexual organ, he bellowed: "a urinal of flesh that desire represents to itself as the chosen recipient." This ugly attack was a blow to Futurism, he went on; it would alienate the movement's best propagandists, the women. "*Woman*," he roared, "is a wonderful *animal*, and when I put into print any part of her body I choose, it is in purest appreciation." When the crowd became silent, he continued: "I do not admit that I can write about a fondant...which gives me some pleasure—& not about a vagina which gives me infinitely more. This is a beautiful word, it means what I say."
>
> In her reconstruction of the scene, Mina emphasizes her awe: "He had said one word—

> distinctly, unaffectedly; & it had crashed down the barrier of prudery. Such primordial pokes of simplicity," she wrote, "might re-direct the universe" (Life 166).

This moment, condensed in the simple use of the word "vagina", revealed for Loy all that was potentially enabling in Futurism. If she could tap into the potency of such diction, she too "might re-direct the universe".

Here, then, was the tool: the word. With it, Loy could disrupt sexual propriety, explode social convention. Marinetti's "pornographic" writings (such as his novel, *Mafarka*) suddenly suggested another kind of exploitation. Rather than violating the woman's body, Marinetti's work ravaged society's collective prudery, which maintained stern attitudes about sexuality and strict division of sex roles. If Marinetti could undertake such action and accomplish such turmoil through his shock tactics, Loy imagined how much greater effect she, a woman Futurist, could achieve.

By 1916, however, Mina had become disillusioned with Papini's persistent misogyny and Marinetti's overblown militarism. Perhaps she realized "this avant-garde movement would not altogether befriend masses who could not surmount the most grinding routine" (Kozloff 12). She had earlier confessed to Mabel Dodge, "there is no hope in any system that combats 'le mal avec le mal'... and that is really Marinetti's philosophy" (Last lxvii). At

the same time, her affairs with Marinetti and Papini had become exhausting and stifling. Mina began to satirize Futurism, which she saw becoming increasingly extreme and conformist, and she soon broke with the movement entirely.

Loy's poem "Human Cylinders" critiques the "simplifications of men" created by automation:

> The human cylinders
> Revolving in the enervating dust
> That wraps each closer in the mystery
> Of singularity
> Among the litter of a sunless afternoon
> Having eaten without tasting
> Talked without communion
> And at least two of us
> Love a very little
> Without seeking
> To know if our two miseries
> In the lucid rush-together of automatons
> Could form one opulent well-being (40).

Loy's break with the Futurists was due at least in part to Marinetti's fascination with automation as its own end (rather than as a means of social progress), and this poem is a response to Marinetti's simplistic "automobilism". But Loy makes a larger comment upon the dehumanizing process of scientific faith:

> The impartiality of the absolute
> Routs the polemic
> Or which of us
> Would not
> Receiving the holy-ghost
> Catch it and caging
> Lose it
> Or in the problematic
> Destroy the Universe
> With a solution (41).

Although she despised sentimentality, Loy was suspicious of "the impartiality of the absolute", which destroys the range and nuance of community. Perhaps Loy foresaw the eventual evolution of Futurism into fascism, a militaristic, absolute form of control which crushed the citizenry into uniformity, either by assimilation or annihilation.

"Reform must grow into revolution or twist into reaction", writes materialist feminist Clara Fraser (Forward to the Past). Futurism suggested a reform of tradition, conventionality, and repression, in theory, but stopped short of revolution in practice—and, as predicted, did "twist into reaction". Loy realized the movement could not accommodate her feminism. She could bring feminism to Futurism and could use Futurist techniques to articulate her feminist concerns, but, ultimately, she could not create a dialectical relationship between the two. Futurism created an entry for Loy into more progressive politics, and observing the antics of its leaders helped her to mature politically.[17]

But what did Futurism offer Loy to attract her to the movement in the first place? Futurism pointed out a cultural crisis to Loy:

> The cultural crisis of modernism thus can be essentially described as one of metaphysics and language: a collapse of transcendental values and old systems of belief (meanings and hierarchies); a failure of social institutions—foremost, for the writer, language—in their function of providing

> meaningful structures for human experiences; and, ultimately, a breakdown in the framing assumptions of Western civilization so far as they rest on the traditional conception of individuality, on the anthropocentric notion of the rational control and supremacy of man over reality (Blum 3-4).

Loy had instinctively felt this "breakdown in the framing assumptions". Her earlier interaction with Gertrude Stein had shown her new ways to respond to the world. Futurism offered an opportunity to accomplish change through language, much as Stein was trying to do with her "portraits and repetition". Futurism offered "Solidarity with any crowd or mob putting forth its body in a fight for freedom from oppression..." (Kozloff 122). Mina's awareness of the work of such sex revolutionaries as Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman, which indeed involved putting forth the body in the fight for freedom, might have led her to believe Futurism could embrace the feminist cause. But, Kozloff continues,

> it was, finally, a sympathy for its aggressiveness rather than the human or moral cause of such a manifestation that moved them as artists (122).

Such an attitude ultimately could not satisfy Loy, who could not undertake aggressive action simply for its own sake. Her activism needed to accomplish material change.

And yet, at the same time, this attitude created another opportunity for Loy. Her first published writings, the "Aphorisms on Futurism", marked her as doubly radical:

> "Aphorisms on Futurism" was the central literary text in an issue including excerpts from a play by Gertrude and an art review by Mabel. Mina had made her literary debut in the company of friends, yet she was also set apart as that mysterious thing, a Futurist (Life 169).

Not only was Loy a Futurist, she was also an iconoclastic woman:

> Whoever Mina Loy was, she had gone beyond the conventions of womanly feelings: women could not forget that they lived in houses in order to live in themselves, nor would they seek to express "egotism...so gigantic that you comprise mankind in your self-sympathy." And how could a woman endorse the aggressive Futurist call to "arrive at respect for man as he shall be"? (Life 169-170).

How indeed. Loy's identity as an avant-garde double-agent catapulted her into an intensely marginalized space.

Susan Suleiman notes, "The avant-garde woman writer is doubly intolerable, seen from the center, because her writing escapes not one but two sets of expectations / categorizations; it corresponds neither to the 'usual revolutionary point of view' nor to the 'woman's point of view'" (15). Since Loy was already marginalized as a Futurist (a "Rogue", one of the "Others"), writing as a woman only increased her marginalized status. And rather than being a problem, this marginalization was enabling: working from an avant-garde space gave her continual freedom to wrench her subject that much more (having destroyed one barricade, why not attack the next, and the next?) The problems arose only when Loy realized the

Futurists themselves—Marinetti with his dehumanizing "automobilism", Papini with his acerbic misogyny—were part of the problem, not the solution.

Loy was drawn away from Futurism by her greater concerns with feminism and female sexuality, although her art, both poetic and visual, would retain the Futurist stylistic traits that gave her the power of words turned weapons. Loy had learned so much from her time with the Futurists, she was able to attack them fearlessly using their own strategies. Futurism provided Loy a way into radicalism, within which she staked an outsider's space from which to call for revolt. It is, however, this outsider's space from which we currently have difficulty trying to recover her. The opportunity to imagine the potential for wrenching change, combined with the artistic structures to accomplish it, must have been invigorating, liberating for Mina Loy at thirty. Futurism offered an alternative to her finite existence in "villadom"—an escape into infinite possibilities.

Chapter Two - Feminism's Blind Alleys: Mina as Feminist

Although Loy never used the term "blind alleys", perhaps she would have found the phrase a useful way to describe the contradictory impulses of feminism in the early twentieth century.[1] Mainstream, reformist feminism pitted itself against revolutionary feminism and triumphed by ceding to the interests of capitalist ideology rather than the good of women and humanity. My intent in this chapter is to examine the "blind alleys" of early twentieth century feminism and to consider how Mina Loy's writings—particularly the "Feminist Manifesto", "one of the most radical polemics ever written on feminism" (Lost xiii-xiv)—were attempts to make feminism relevant both to herself and to her potential readers. Such an effort was in keeping with Loy's avant-garde impulse to draw art out of isolation and back into life praxis.

"Blind alleys" is an interestingly nuanced phrase: it refers spatially to an alley (unexpectedly) closed at one end; it refers metaphorically to a fruitless plan, something proposed but never developed for action. What I am calling the "blind alleys" of early twentieth-century feminist discourse are women's reproductivity (birth control and the right to maternity), women's "nature" (love and sentimentality), and women's material position (poverty and dependence). These topics were rarely

debated properly in society—in fact, in many cases, their discussion was legally truncated or was drowned out by reformist concerns such as suffrage and professions for women. Issues such as free love, birth control, and poverty were originally introduced by the radical element of the feminist movement, who sought to create real social change.[2] Gradually, these issues were also taken up by some reform feminists, but usually superficially—as an attractive diversion from the fact the liberal reform movement was not making real change but, rather, was tying women tighter to capitalism and patriarchy.

Loy breaks free of such diversionary tactics by using Futurist-inspired polemics to critique mainstream feminism.[3] Loy's poetry contests the staid discourse of reform feminism by bringing a more honest, emancipated, feminist life praxis to her art. Rachel DuPlessis sees this praxis producing an embodied discourse of sexual subjects:

> This liberatory feminism [i.e., Loy's] is in dialogue both with general ideology and with a specific kind of Victorian and modern reforming feminism called the Social Purity movement, which combines claims for the moral superiority of women with a denial of female sexuality. Social purity feminists made urgent allegories of gender division in sexual matters: men were lustful, women were spiritual; men needed their sexual (and synonyms were bestial, animal) instincts curbed by women as asexual guardians of an evolutionary superiority, glossed as a minimal need for the "sexual embrace"... (193).

I will show Loy's critique of such "gender division" at work in the "Feminist Manifesto" and a series of satirical poems, including "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots", "The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni", "The Black Virginity" and "Lions' Jaws".[4] In examining these works, I will also draw biographical details from Loy's own life, both to suggest Loy's own feminist commitment and to demonstrate how she personally brought art into life praxis—and vice versa.

Loy's feminist aims were fixed upon creating a fully realized self, a female body whose needs and desires had to be recognized and admitted before they could be actualized. Making women aware of their own potential after so many centuries of subjugation and oppression was a massive undertaking, yet Loy believed it could be easily realized if women could learn to see themselves as distinct, fully formed beings; she thought this awareness could be generated through language and discourse. Loy's poetry suggests that women's lives, as they are lived under patriarchy, are flat and limited because they are defined by men and men's expectation, rather than by their own desires, needs, and abilities. The tools of language Loy discovered in Futurism became the weapons in her attack upon patriarchy.

Recently I found the following passage in my casual reading, which suggested to me that Loy remains ahead of her time:

> In a curious twist, the dissident feminists of the 1990s are witnesses to the sexual revolutionaries of their mothers' generation, for in their catalogue of grievances against us is the account of what we used to believe. They tell us that we fought for sexual equality with men, not, as now, for moral and emotional superiority. That our love-making with men promised pleasure with long-haired sensualists, not victimization at the hands of sexual brutes. That our bodies lay within our own control and were not alienated "sites" of male sexual terror. That sexual disappointment signaled a fraudulent relationship rather than traumatizing violence. That pornography, such as we knew it then, was sexual free speech, not the "theorizing" of rape. And remember the androgynous ideal? So far were men from being the enemy that we even fantasized an ideal sexual self that would be male and female at once (Kostash 14).

Reading this piece, where a speaker from the "mothers' generation" reveals the beliefs of feminist sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s, I realized why Loy was not reclaimed as a feminist heroine when Kouidis' biography was published in 1980: Loy's perspective on the "battle of the sexes" was hardly relevant to equality feminism. Indeed, Loy was more interested in the differences between men and women; she disbelieved in equality feminism: "that pathetic clap-trap war cry Woman is the equal of man...she is NOT!" (Lost 153). The passage also suggests why Loy continues to hold little interest for today's feminists, if the writer's interpretation of 1990s "post-feminist" concerns are correct. "Moral and

emotional superiority" did not interest Loy. Such concerns would probably have struck Loy as being entirely mired in the very tradition she sought to escape, what DuPlessis calls the "urgent allegories of gender division". The moral superiority trope was just another trick of male logic, as Loy suggests sharply in "Parturition": "The irresponsibility of the male / Leaves woman her superior Inferiority" (Lost 5). "Sexual revolution" was the way to liberation for the fully realized woman, as Loy elaborates in her "Feminist Manifesto" (1914).[5]

Engels proposes legal, social, and economic equality, as posited in communist theory, as the solution to the "woman question":

> ...the peculiar character of the supremacy of the husband over the wife in the modern family, the necessity of creating real social equality between them and the way to do it, will only be seen in the clear light of day when both possess legally complete equality of right (137).

Loy's thinking diverges from Engels' here because she distrusted the notion of "legally complete equality of right". Loy sought something more basic: an end to sex oppression through sex revolution. Engels frames this suggestion in economic terms:

> Then it will be plain that the first condition for the liberation of the wife is to bring the whole female sex back into public industry, and that this in turn demands that the characteristic of the monogamous family as the economic unit of society be abolished (137-138).[6]

The abolition of monogamous marriage ruptures several social institutions and represents exactly the kind of social praxis Loy yearned to accomplish. Going well beyond "free love" to social freedom, this proposal breaks out of the restrictive functioning of custom and tradition. Most of Loy's contemporary feminists, however, would not go so far.[7]

Feminism was not a new movement in the early twentieth century, having roots at least as deep as the Enlightenment. The word "feminist" was current and, as today, carried strong, generally negative, connotations.[8] Feminism in the late Victorian period and early twentieth century tended to be organized around moral crusades—vivisection, prostitution, infectious disease legislation, and prohibition, for example. Women's bodies were often at the centre of so-called feminist reforms. Mary Odem notes, "In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sexuality of young single women became the focus of great public anxiety and the target of new policies of intervention and control by the state" (Daughters 1). Reform movements were class-based and gender-biased, and they tended to favour greater discipline of women's bodies and behaviour—particularly for lower class women.[9] With the increasing mobility of

women caused by capitalism, greater legal restraint became necessary.

Suffrage in the early twentieth century was also a divisive issue along class lines. There were two major English suffrage movements: the Women's Social and Political Union—the violent "suffragettes"—led by the Pankhursts, and the non-militant National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, led by Mrs Fawcett. Both groups appealed to wealthy, upper middle-class women and liberal men. Similarly, the right for women to hold property (won in Britain in 1871) and the right to join the professions (1920) were at best vague goals for women of the working class, who were already working outside the household, often under very difficult circumstances, and who had no property of which to take ownership. Such reforms were drastically at odds, despite the reformers' best attempts, with the needs of working-class women and their families.

There were working-class women's suffrage movements (identified as "radical suffragists" to distinguish them from the militant suffragettes). These groups tended to arise out of labour unrest and union formation, particularly in the mill trade, but the women's groups normally split off from the main labour organizations as they realized their feminist concerns were not being addressed.[10] Working-class suffragists tended to be

socially progressive, and their agendas included "equal pay, divorce law reform, equal guardianship rights over their children for women and men" along with universal suffrage (One Hand 259).

Sheila Jeffreys argues the suffrage campaign energized women to seek other kinds of social reform, such as an end to sexual violence:

> In the year immediately before the First World War, as the suffrage campaign reached new heights of energy, one of the strongest motivating forces of the campaigners was the belief that the vote would enable women to fight men's sexual violence better, both through getting equal pay which would make sexual exploitation of women more difficult and through making laws more favourable to women in the area of sexual violence (Debates 4).

But this energy tended to be too narrowly channelled to bring these motives into public discussion; and some of these issues simply would not be discussed within the suffrage debate, because of class prejudices. "Mrs Pankhurst declared that 'Our members are absolutely single-minded; they concentrate all their forces on one object, political equality with men. No member of the WSPU divides her attention between suffrage and other social reform'" (One Hand 24). The WSPU membership was made up largely of middle and upper-class women; social reforms seemed to them either unnecessary or relevant only to vulgar, working-class women.

At the same time, another battle, the battle over reproductive bodies, was developing and its outcome was

critical to women. This was the root of the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 70s, a moment of potential rupture quickly contained and controlled by the dominant discourse. In the United States, Margaret Sanger was arrested repeatedly for circulating information about birth control, abortion, venereal disease and sexuality.[11] In England, Marie Stopes performed similar work under the innocuous banner of aid to "married love". Unfortunately, important as this work was in liberating some women, "Women like Stopes and Sanger joined in the conscription of women into compulsory heterosexuality and sexual intercourse whilst striving to provide some relief to women from its most damaging effects, such as unwanted childbearing" (Debates 6). Sanger and Stopes spoke from an imperious, middle-class "progressive" point of view, in a discourse intended as much to contain as to liberate sexuality, even within marriage. Sanger and Stopes promoted prevention—for example, of unwanted pregnancy. What they did not—perhaps could not—address were the social ideologies underlying the need for preventative measures (e.g., the stigma of bearing an illegitimate child). Profound or radical as their work may have seemed, it ultimately supported a liberal ideology, not a revolutionary one.

Loy had been interested in women's issues from an early age but viewed the established feminist movement

with a critical eye. Through Mabel Dodge, Mina had been introduced to such thinkers as Emma Goldman, Alexandra Kollontai, Rosa Luxembourg and Clara Zeltkin, who approached feminism from socialist or anarchist perspectives. These women echoed Loy's own experience: there was much more at stake in feminism than simply the right to vote or the right to hold jobs.[12] Thus, Loy began by urging women to escape the capitalist norms underwritten by conventional feminism. "The feminist movement as at present instituted is Inadequate", she announces in the opening lines of the "Feminist Manifesto". Her counter-proposal, however, is drastic: "...the only method is Absolute Demolition" (153): total warfare. Reform is not enough, Loy says:

> Cease to place your confidence in economic legislation, vice-crusades & uniform education—you are glossing over Reality. Professional & commercial careers are opening up for you—
> Is that all you want? (153)

Loy realized legislation would not free any woman; indeed, it would only entrench traditional exploitation in law, making it fully legal and defensible.

Suffrage did not concern Loy as much as society's traditional treatment of women and women's subsequent internalized view of themselves. What Loy sought to create was an entirely new, feminist-inflected ethics, based upon the validation of an individual female self within the community (rather than upon an obliterated

identity scripted to conform to convention and expectation). As Loy exhorts in her "Feminist Manifesto", "Women who adapt themselves to a theoretical valuation of their sex as a relative impersonality, are not yet Feminine" (Lost 154). "Femininity" and "Masculinity", as garments donned according to social codes, are not meaningful attributes, Loy says; they are only valuable "if you honestly desire to find your level without prejudice"—that is, outside of the valuation of "the rubbish heap of tradition" (153). In society, Loy scolds,

> The value of man is assessed entirely according to his use or interest to the community, the value of woman, depends entirely on chance, her success or insuccess of manoeuvering a man into taking the life-long responsibility of her (155).

Women must place more value on themselves, Loy believed: "there are no restrictions". Women must stop capitulating to capitalist norms. Neither men nor women should reduce themselves to the value of their "use or interest to the community", for this makes them endlessly exploitable; but neither should their intrinsic worth depend upon their ability to exploit others.

Loy also attacks marriage in the "Manifesto". Marriage carries with it the social order of the patriarchal economy: genealogy and the legitimacy of offspring, property rights and inheritance, and naming. Loy sought to disrupt this order by destroying the "goods" of the trade—that is, women's exchange value,

located in the intact hymen. She demands of women the sacrifice of their physical virginity:

> To obtain results you must make sacrifices & the first & greatest sacrifice you have to make is of your "virtue"
> The fictitious value of woman as identified with her physical purity—is too easy a stand-by—rendering her lethargic in the acquisition of intrinsic merits of character (154).

The exchange of her hymen for the promise of a life of comfort and ease (a strictly middle-class arrangement) destroyed a woman's value of her self, Loy believed:

> The advantages of marriage are too ridiculously ample—compared to all other trades—for under modern conditions a woman can accept preposterously luxurious support from a man (with-out return of any sort—even offspring)—as a thank offering for her virginity (155).

Such a soft life ensured its own perpetuation, for few women would risk trading such security for "mere" sexual pleasure, especially in an era when the sexual pleasure of women was a new concept. Loy notes later in the "Manifesto" that sex is portrayed negatively to women to keep them from having sex outside marriage; this is the motivation for her asserting "in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it" (156). Sexuality is weighted with negative associations, superstitions, and dangers to make it unappealing and frightening to "virtuous" women. Yet the patriarchal system had a method for catching renegades as well:

> The woman who has not succeeded in striking that advantageous bargain—is prohibited from any but surreptitious re-action to Life-stimuli—& entirely debarred maternity (154).

For the woman who failed to make a successful deal, life effectively ended, for she either became a victim of the patriarchal economy or was declared redundant within its supply and demand logic.[13] She became "damaged goods". She might be bought later at a bargain (a goodwill or mercy marriage), or she might be rented by the hour (prostitute). Or she might simply become a vulnerable, single woman, the socially stigmatized spinster. Regardless, her fate was determined by patriarchal economics.

The "Feminist Manifesto" reveals the economic basis of sexual exploitation; its argument is rendered in economic terms to show how closely patriarchal politics and women's sexual subjugation are related:

> Men & women are enemies, with the enmity of the exploited for the parasite, the parasite for the exploited—at present they are at the mercy of the advantage that each can take of the others sexual dependence—. The only point at which the interests of the sexes merge—is the sexual embrace.[14]

Loy frames the relationship as a battle, a war, much as Engels had suggested:

> ...monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes unknown throughout the whole previous prehistoric period (Engels 128).

Thus, the "battle of the sexes" is true class warfare. Loy's manifesto appeals to the proletariat of women to revolt against their oppressors, to refuse to be alienated from themselves any longer, to dismantle the means/end logic that trades on women's bodies.

The "Feminist Manifesto" is an attack on the property relations that control women and maintain patriarchy. In controlling women's reproductive rights, patriarchy ensures its own perpetuation. Loy attacks this system vigorously, saying, "Every woman has a right to maternity" and "Woman must become more responsible for the child than man" (155). Engels had framed the same question from the understanding of patriarchal economics:

> With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society....The care and education of the children becomes a public affair; society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not. This removes all the anxiety about the "consequences," which today is the most essential social—moral as well as economic—factor that prevents a girl from giving herself completely to the man she loves. Will not that suffice to bring about the gradual growth of unconstrained sexual intercourse and with it a more tolerant public opinion in regard to a maiden's honour and a woman's shame? (Engels 139).[15]

Loy believed a woman should have children when it suited her, regardless of her marital status:

> Each child...should be the result of a definite period of psychic development in her life—& not necessarily of a possible irksome & outworn continuance of an alliance (155).

Material discrimination against women, as well as ostracizing social convention, was what Loy argued against when she called for the right to maternity. A woman should not be forced to carry a child she was not prepared for, nor should she be forced to abstain from expressing her sexuality simply because she was unmarried.[16] Loy believed women's lives should "follow their individual lines of personal evolution".[17]

Another provocative statement in the "Manifesto" is the declaration "Women must destroy in themselves, the desire to be loved" (155). By this, Loy means women must abandon centuries of training and tradition that has prepared them to be nothing more than nubile commodities, rendered social absences unless they have the approval of a man. The new discourses of sexology and psychology reinforced this belief. For example, Freud taught that most women are narcissists, capable not of loving but only of being loved.

> Strictly speaking, such women love only themselves with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and that man finds favor with them who fulfills this condition (Freud 113).

Some women are capable of loving "according to the masculine type", he concedes, but

> Even for women whose attitude towards the man remains cool and narcissistic there is a way which

> leads to complete object-love. In the child to whom they give birth, a part of their own body comes to them as an object other than themselves, upon which they can lavish out of their narcissism complete object-love (114).

Thus, in motherhood, narcissism is simultaneously transcended and carried on, as the woman achieves "complete object-love" by loving the child who comes to her as "a part of [her] own body". Either way, a woman reaches sexual maturity (object-love) only by fulfilling the traditional roles: wife or mother.

Unlike Freud, Loy believes a woman who desires to be loved is one who does not value her own strength, one whose being is defined only in confirmation by the other. Romantic love is thus a political oppression, because it teaches women to deny themselves and assert the other; it is, in Loy's view, strongly anti-narcissistic, because it denies the self completely. Loy stresses "love," as it is transmitted to women in ideology, is an artificial emotion which pushes women to seek what is easiest, rather than what is meaningful or important:

> The desire for comfortable protection instead of an intelligent curiosity & courage in meeting & resisting the pressure of life sex or so called love must be reduced to its initial element... (156).

Sentimentality—romance—the material trappings of "love" were what Loy believes bound women in complicity to patriarchy. Because they had restricted economic freedom, women looked to men to provide material needs; the

provision of material needs was then ideologically constructed to signify "love". Loy calls for women to resist this dangerous façade.

Loy's most outrageous demand in the manifesto—"the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity throughout the female population at puberty—"—reclaims surgical intervention in women's sexuality as a subversion of medical and moral authority. Clitoridectomy was a fairly routine "cure" for certain "female diseases" in Loy's day, but it is uncertain whether Loy was aware of this practice.[18] Loy was definitely not advocating this kind of intervention.[19] Rather, she was trying to provoke the realization that the presence or absence of a slip of inconsequential tissue should not be the only determining agent of a woman's fate: "...the first self-enforced law for the female sex, as a protection against the man made bogey of virtue—which is the principal instrument of her subjection..." (Lost 154-155).

The most important aspect of the "Feminist Manifesto" is that, although it is an exceptionally didactic text, its critique embodies an essential avant-garde praxis. Like the "Aphorisms on Futurism", the "Feminist Manifesto" speaks doubly to its writer and reader, blurring the boundaries between production and reception. Like most manifesto-writers, Loy announces her ideas—makes them manifest—then leaves the awakening of

consciousness to the audience—who would, in turn, respond dialectically to her. Thus, the "Feminist Manifesto" is what Bürger characterizes an avant-garde "manifestation" (50), an incendiary event or happening intended to promote radical change. Loy simultaneously undertook an avant-garde poetics: de "*pratiquer la poesie*".

An acrimonious indictment of Italian patriarchy, Loy's "Virgins Plus Curtain Minus Dots" attacks the economic industry of marriage.[20] The title forms a mathematical expression which the speakers try unsuccessfully to solve. The poem opens, "Houses hold virgins", implying containment and entrapment. The speakers, the "virgins" of the title, survey the truncated landscape of unmarried women:

> See the men pass
> Their hats are not ours
> We take a walk
> They are going somewhere
> And they may look everywhere
>
> Men's eyes look into things
> Our eyes look out (21).

The women have nowhere to go, nothing to look forward to; they cannot actively seek their own fates. They may be scrutinized, but they must always "look out" and never look back. Their virginity—and their missing dowries—forces them to "Stare beyond probability" (21).

The poem is intensely critical of the double standard of sexual behaviour for men and women: "So much flesh in the world / Wanders at will", the speakers observe, watching "the men pass" and knowing "They are going somewhere". Behind the curtains, the virgins are kept ignorant:

> Virgins may whisper
> 'Transparent nightdresses made all of lace'
> Virgins may squeak
> 'My dear I should faint'
> Flutter....flutter....flutter....
> .... 'And then the man—'
> Wasting our giggles (21-2).

But they long for something they know is kept from them:

> A secret well kept
> Makes the noise of the world (22).

Loy reveals how order is maintained in the "Latin Borghese", through myth-making:

> We have been taught
> Love is a god
> White with soft wings (22);

and through violence:

> Somebody who was never
> a virgin
> Has bolted the door
> Put curtains at our windows (22).

The "curtains" confining the speakers are the creation of "Somebody who was never a virgin"—a man. Yet the poem warns this "Somebody" of the eventual rebellion against such confinement:

> Spread it with gold

And you carry it home
Against your shirt front
To a shaded light
With the door locked
Against virgins who
Might scratch [23].

The speakers might one day break free of their subjugation and act out aggressively, a possibility which the barriers and social conventions mentioned in the poem (bolted doors, curtained windows, the mirror, the confessional) are intended to prevent.

Without "dots", the speakers have no social value. The speakers are critically aware of the economic equation of their social exchange:

Nobody shouts
Virgins for sale
Yet where are our coins
For buying a purchaser
Love is a god
Marriage expensive (22).

Loy reveals how the heterosexual relationship in marriage underwrites the patriarchal economy: the exchange-price of marriage is a woman's virginity—plus a handsome dowry.

The realization that women were subjugated by the male economy was nothing new; the notion that women were property belonging to their fathers, brothers and husbands was entrenched in centuries of legal tradition. Yet before Loy, no-one had made this topic the subject of poetry, questioning tradition in such an incisive,

oppositional manner. Her original readers, who had never before seen such a thing in print, could not help but respond to the pathos, despair, and anger of the virginal speakers. Whether shocked, disgusted, or outraged at Loy's lines, readers were made aware of a new perspective, a new possibility, and the world was ever so slightly changed. This was Loy's process of enlightenment, with the eventual aim of dismantling tradition.

Loy applauded the violent destruction of tradition the Futurists sought, but was uncertain about their position on women's role in the future society. In "Three Moments in Paris" she presents herself in the image of the typical Futurist woman:

> Beautiful half-hour of being a mere woman
> The animal woman
> Understanding nothing of man
> But mastery and the security of imparted physical heat
> Indifferent to cerebral gymnastics
> Or regarding them as the self-indulgent play of children
> Or the thunder of alien gods
> But you woke me up (15).

The longer she spent with the Futurists, the more clearly she recognized their theoretical "scorn for women" was a real and significant problem in the movement. This understanding is revealed in her bitter satires, such as "The Effectual Marriage of the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni":

So here we might dispense with her
Gina being a female
But she was more than that
Being an incipience a correlative
an instigation to the reaction of men
From the palpable to the transcendent
Mollescent irritant of his fantasy
Gina had her use Being useful (36).

The Futurist demystification of art destroyed the artificial elevation of the female muse, rendering women merely "useful". Futurism had promised a society of equal participation, but what women found in reality, Loy suggests, is that their role in the movement was to provide for its leaders:

Ding dong said the bell
Miovanni Gina called
Would it be fitting for you to tell
The time for supper
Pooh said Miovanni I am
Outside time and space
Patience said Gina is an attribute
And she learned at any hour to offer
The dish appropriately delectable (37).

Mina's feminist irritations are plainly articulated:

In the evening they looked out of their two windows
Miovanni out of his library window
Gina from the kitchen window
From among his pots and pans
Where he so kindly kept her
Where she so wisely busied herself
Pots and Pans she cooked in them
All sorts of sialagogues
Some say that happy women are immaterial
(36).

Mina, who in life endured a tortured relationship with Papini, ironically imagined herself a "happy (Futurist) woman": one who did not matter and maybe did not even

exist. Gina, Mina's poetic persona, accedes to this arrangement:

> Of what their peace consisted
> We cannot say
> Only that he was magnificently man
> She insignificantly a woman who understood
>
> ...
>
> If he had become anything else
> Gina's world would have been at an end
> Gina with no axis to revolve upon
> Would have dwindled to a full stop (37-39).

And yet a tension is clearly at work in the relationship, a conflict between what Gina desires and what she can permit herself inside the "Marriage" contract:

> When she was lazy
> She wrote a poem on the milk bill
> The first strophe Good morning
> The second Good night
> Something not too difficult to
> Learn by heart (39).

The poem turns on a deflated moment of realization:

> While Miovanni thought alone in the dark
> Gina supposed that peeping she might see
> A round light shining where his mind was
> She never opened the door
> Fearing that this might blind her
> Or even
> That she should see Nothing at all (38).

Futurism, Gina/Mina realizes, turns out to be just another movement of superman posturing: its idealistic, deified leaders "remained / Monumentally the same" (39). At the moment the Futurists called for the destruction of

the staid, the conventional, and the institutional, they still depended on women to uphold the private duties of domestic tradition.[21]

Loy believed one of the strongest oppressors of women was religion. She begins to examine this topic in one of her earliest poems, "The Prototype", in which she narrates her disillusion with a Christmas Eve church service. The congregation adores an idol infant Christ, the "prototype" for human perfection:

> And I who am called heretic,
> and the only follower in Christ's foot-steps
> among this crowd adoring a wax doll
> —for I alone am worshipping the poor
> sore baby—the child of sex igno-
> rance and poverty (Lost 221).

Loy here takes up the liberal discourse of Sanger and Stopes, suggesting if the child had been wanted, it might have shared "immunity from / the inconsistencies of Life" (221). But Loy's utopian impulse shines through in the next stanza, as she yearns for social change.

> I am on my knees humbly before
> him, praying, not to a god, but to
> humanity's social consciousness, to
> do for that mother & that child in the light, what
> the priests have tried to do in the dark (222).[22]

"The Prototype" is one of Loy's most didactic poems, suggesting the direction of emancipatory change:

> Blow out the candles—
> Throw away the wax-baby
> Use the churches as night-shelters
> Come into the Daylight & preach
> a New Gospel (222).

The poem is not strictly feminist in its approach, but in it we can see Loy beginning to work out her program of social critique.[23]

In "The Black Virginity", Loy reveals how the Christian mythology of the evil of women creates fear and hatred of real women. The hatred is fostered in the priests:

> It is an old religion that put us in our places
> Here am I in lilac print
> Preposterously no less than the world flesh and devil
> Having no more idea what those are
> What I am
> Than Baby Priests of what "He" is
> or they are—(43).

Women are erased from the priests' lives in their pursuit of clerical power. The "Baby Priests" dream "Not of me or you Sister Saraminta" but "Of no more or less / Than the fit of Pope's mitres". But the denial causes them bitterness:

> The last with apostolic lurch
> Tries for a high hung fruit
> And misses
> Any way it is inedible
> It is always thus
> In the Public Garden (43).

The initiates are "train[ed] for immobility", girded with "Modulation / Intimidation / Pride of misapprehended preparation" (42). They display "Truncated juvenility" and "Subjugated adolescence". Their chastity—their

"Black Virginity"—gives them "Union in severity". These priests come not to love their congregations but to resent their life and vigour. And now "It is noon / And salvation's seedlings / Are headed off for the refectory" (43). "What nonsense", the speaker observes: how can these priests counsel their parishioners when they have never truly lived? How can they have compassion—for women in particular—when Woman is still and always the temptation? Once again Loy wrenches her art back into life praxis, not merely as a political tool, but as a literal "spanner in the works" of the patriarchal, capitalist machine.

One of the most important systems within the patriarchal economy is naming. Naming identifies property and confers or withholds legitimacy. Loy took up the practice of naming and used it parodically in several ways: in her identification of self, in the creation of poetic autobiography, and in writing a living woman into her texts.

In 1903, Mina Gertrude Lowy moved to Paris to become an artist. The following year, she married Stephen Haweis and changed her surname to "Loy", later remarking, "The name is an assumed one, adopted in a spirit of mockery in place of that of one of the oldest and most distinguished families in England" (Last xiv). Loy refused to take the name "Haweis", although she was frequently referred to by

others as "Mrs Stephen Haweis"; Mina did not define herself as Stephen's feminine alias.[24] Refusing her husband's name was an assertion of her own self-created identity, a rejection of the traditional assimilation of woman into wife. This small gesture underpins all "Mina Loy's" subsequent activities.[25]

Poetry was one method for Mina to work through the "crisis in consciousness" her political awakening evoked. One of the ways she did this was "the practice of parody as a form of critical rereading (and rewriting)" (Suleiman 142). But because Mina lacked true "intertextuality", having received only a grudging formal education and limited exposure to literature, she made a text of her life and wrote biography into her poetry, naming names.[26] "Giovanni Franchi", "The Effectual Marriage", and "Lions' Jaws" make ample use of this strategy.

The poem "Giovanni Franchi" ridicules both the petty jealousies of the Futurist movement and Loy's troubled involvement with its leaders, as these few loaded lines reveal:

> Now the threewomen
> For pity's sake
> Let us think of her as she to save time
> Seeing the minor Giovanni
> Sitting at the major Giovanni's feet
> Made sure he must be counting his toes
> All to the contrary he was picking the
> philosopher's brains (Lost 29).

But it also suggests a feminist problem Loy was grappling with:

> The first instinct first again may
> renascent gods save us from the enigmatic
> penetralia of Firstness
> Was to be faithful to a man first
> The second to be loyal to herself first
> She would have to find which self first
> The third which might as well have been first
> Was to find out how many toes the
> philosopher Giovanni Bapini had first
> (28).

Loy satirizes the traditional crisis of woman's faithfulness and loyalty alongside her own crisis of self-realization. The poem simultaneously invites and refuses a biographical reading, the tactic of a wary subject who is not yet secure in her speaking voice.

Loy is somewhat more confident with voice in "The Effectual Marriage", but is brutally unrestrained in "Lions' Jaws", an unrepentant attack on Futurism:

> Defiance of old idolatries
> inspires new schools
> ...
> Raminetti
> cracked the whip of the circus-master
> astride a prismatic locomotive
> ramping the tottering platform
> of the Arts
> of which this conjuring commercial traveller
> imported some novelties from
> Paris in his pocket . . .
> souvenirs for his disciples (47-48).

Meanwhile,

> The erudite Bapini
> experimenting
> in auto-hypnotic God-head
> on a mountain

rolls off as Raminetti's plastic velocity
explodes his crust
of library dust
...
in flabbergastism
. . . he kisses Raminetti
full on his oratory
in the arena
rather fancying Himself
in the awesome proportions
of an eclectic mother-in-law
to a raw ménage (48).

But "Shall manoeuvres in the new manner / pass unremarked?" No, Loy decides, and she announces herself in both men's lives:

These amusing men
discover in their mail
duplicate petitions
to be the lurid mother of "their" flaggergast child
from Nima Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias
Imna Oly
(secret service buffoon to the Women's Cause) (49).

Loy appears in the traditional role of chaotic woman and provokes a schism between Raminetti and Bapini by offering both the opportunity to use her as the vessel of their "flabbergast child". Loy savagely predicts the outcome of clashing male egos:

While flabbergastism boils over
and Ram: and Bap:
avoid each other's sounds
This Duplex-Conquest
claims a "sort of success" (49).

Finally, and probably happily, Loy writes,

As for Imna Oly
I agree with Mrs. Krar Standing Hail
She is not quite a lady (50).

Mina is not at all a "lady", not in the refined, diluted sense of the word. Mina announces herself to the world as feminist provocateur and, importantly, woman writer.

Roger Conover re-describes Mina Loy in the "Introduction" to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker.*

> Feminist and Futurist, wife and lover, militant and pacifist, actress and model, Christian Scientist and nurse, she was the binarian's nightmare. She was a Futurist, Dadaist, Surrealist, feminist, conceptualist, modernist, post-modernist, and none of the above (xiii),

The "binarian's nightmare" strategy proves to be effective for Loy, who hated being contained or labelled. "She wore femininity as a mask," Conover continues, "sometimes to disguise what she often called her 'masculine side,' sometimes to draw the masculine to her side and sometimes to make her feminism less threatening" (xiv). "Femininity" was Loy's parody of "masculinity" and was an excellent way to deconstruct typical patriarchal assumptions. We can never assume that Loy's femininity is in complicity with or capitulating to patriarchy; indeed, we should always assume it is a carefully constructed role meant to evade male containment. Loy suggests this reading of herself in the "Aphorisms on Futurism", coaching readers, "Not be a cipher in your ambiente / But to colour your ambiente with your preferences" (Lost

151). In other words, make the world your own and let everyone else catch up with you. Or as Loy put it herself, "I am reasonable and the scheme may catch up with me" (Last 306).

"Many of her early poems are satirical portraits of her former lovers, or songs of disillusion about sex, childbirth, or romance", Conover says (Lost xvi). This is not because Loy is unschooled or a weak poet; rather, this is a strategy to bring women's lived lives into the dominant discourse. Drawing upon her own life-text, she spoke of a side of women's lives that was almost muted in mainstream feminism's liberal discourses. Loy spoke of the woman's body, a body capable of much more than mere domestic cares.

In the "Feminist Manifesto", Loy tells women "You are on the eve of a devastating psychological upheaval", then asks, "are you prepared for the Wrench—?" (Lost 153). The "Wrench" is the avant-garde attack of the woman writer: the violent, painful, tearing change of society accomplished by revolutionarily changing minds. If Loy could "wrench" language, she could change people's thinking. She could jam up the Futurist machine, halt the persistent churning of the capitalist factories. With this change started, revolution was inevitable.

Loy revealed feminism's blind alleys for what they were—dodges, decoys, defenses: empty promises made to

pacify the calls for wrenching social change. Instead, Loy aggressively offered the Wrench.

Chapter Three - Flesh and the Female Body: Mina as Female Sexed

Loy believed "women's ignorance of sexual realities stood in the way of their self-fulfillment" (Burke, "The New Poetry" 41), and she wrote to assert the power of women's sexuality as an invigorating force to drive revolution. In this chapter, I will look first at how Loy articulates a sexual female body (concentrating on *Songs to Joannes*), then at how she speaks the radical reproductive body (through "Parturition") while attempting to dismantle the patriarchal economy of genealogy. Loy's feminism produced a vocal subject, embodied, sexed, and thinking: possessing thoughts and feelings, as well as the impetus to act intellectually upon them.

The organizing theme of this chapter, hearkening back to the epigraph of this thesis, is to discover "where sex lies" for Loy and to examine how she combats the lies.[1] This approach is suggested by Loy herself in the opening lines of the "Feminist Manifesto", where she writes, "the lies of centuries have got to go" (153). Loy challenged some major social assumptions in the "Manifesto": the belief that sex is unclean, impure, negative and must be denied to women outside of marriage; that women are helpless and immature and must depend on men for their keeping; that women need love and marriage;

and that a woman is "worth" only as much as patriarchy "values" the condition of her hymen.

In discussing the writing of women's sexuality, Susan Suleiman suggests "...what may be needed is not merely the usurpation of old narrative structures and the old words by new speakers...but the inventing of new structures, new words, a new syntax that will shake up and *transform* old habits of thought and old ways of seeing" (Suleiman 123; italics hers). Suleiman's discussion, however, is rooted in the recent past, using 1969 as its anchor date. Loy was doing exactly was Suleiman calls for—in 1917:

> Come to me There is something
> I have got to tell you and I can't tell
> Something taking shape
> Something that has a new name
> A new dimension
> A new use
> A new illusion (Lost 57).

And she was doing it explosively. "Detractors shuddered at Mina Loy's subject-matter and derided her elimination of punctuation marks and the audacious spacing of her lines", *Others* publisher Alfred Kreymborg recalled (Troubadour 235). Loy's aim was exactly to "shake up and transform old habits of thought"; from her Futurist background and feminist beliefs she drew the "new structures, new words, [and] new syntax" to do so.

It may be difficult for some of us, living after Betty Friedan, Shere Hite, Germaine Greer, Kate Millet,

Annie Sprinkle and Pat Califia, to understand the challenge of writing woman's sexuality in the early twentieth century.[2] It is hard to realize the sexual power of the now-quaint flash of an ankle. It is difficult now, in an era of leather boutiques, lingerie shops, micro-minis, thong bikinis, and sex-aid videos, to recognize the intense sexual energy the societal catastrophe of World War One released in women (revealed most materially—and most problematically—in the fleshly icon of the flapper).

For young women of today, who grew up reading Judy Blume, Sandra Scoppettone and Norma Klein, it is difficult to realize how miraculous the casual speaking of women's bodies—bodies that menstruate, bodies with breasts, sexual bodies, fertile bodies—actually was—or how hard-won this speaking/writing, still a right only a few decades old and still in constant conflict, could have been. It is difficult to understand a culture that believed that a woman who could pronounce the word "virginity" or the word "pregnancy" was vulgar, profane, ill-mannered, wicked. In the 1990s, many women take "sexual liberation" (if problematically) for granted.

But quite unlike some feminists, who "confused sexual liberation with the political liberation of women" (227), Loy understood that only a fully self-realized woman could cause revolution. Loy denied neither her own

sexuality nor the strength of her sexual desire. Sheila Jeffreys writes,

> It was true that women's genitals had been regarded in male culture as disgusting or dangerous and that female children had been brought up to ignore their genitals or feel ashamed of them. Girls and women had been brought up to deny the importance of their own sexual pleasure, ignorant of the existence of the clitoris and guilty about masturbation (Anticlimax 235).

But Jeffreys believes "the ideas and practices of [liberal humanist] feminists were locked into a sexual revolution which was not premised upon women's interests, but on the maintenance of male supremacy" (Anticlimax 236). In her view, liberating women's bodies simply secures men's continuing dominance economically, socially, politically, and sexually.[3] Loy's perspective was entirely opposite. Loy believed liberating women's bodies from social taboo would "constitute an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine" (Lost 156). She writes,

> Another great illusion that woman must use all her introspective clear sightedness & unbiassed bravery to destroy—for the sake of her <u>self respect</u> is the impurity of sex the realisation in defiance of superstition that there is <u>nothing impure in sex</u>—except in the mental attitude to it (Lost 156).

Loy faced huge challenges in liberating the female body and female desire, given competing dominant discourses around her. Shortly before Loy was born,

William Acton published *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, in which he firmly stated

> there are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever. Others, again, immediately after each period, do become, to a limited degree, capable of experiencing it; but this capacity is often temporary, and may entirely cease until the next menstrual period. Many of the best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and of domestic duties are the only passions they feel (Jeffreys, Debates 62).

Closer to the turn of the century, with the increasing mobility brought about by capitalism, women's sexuality was perceived as more dangerous, requiring legislative discipline to contain it:

> The expanded state regulation of adolescent female sexuality was part of a broad trend toward greater control of sexual behaviour in general. Expressions of sexuality that did not conform to a marital, reproductive framework were increasingly subjected to government surveillance and control.... These included legislation prohibiting the dissemination of obscene literature, the criminalization of abortion, stringent measures targeting prostitution, and heightened legal repression of homosexuality (Daughters 6).[4]

By the time Loy started writing, sexology was an established science. Jeffreys says, "sexologists before the Second World War believed that they would ensure women's subordination by eliciting a sexual response to men. Compulsory conscription to heterosexuality and the performance of the orgasm with a man were seen to ensure women's submission to her husband and the death of feminism, lesbianism, manhating and spinsterhood"

(Anticlimax 1). Jeffreys suspects sexual liberation as a patriarchal creation "to orchestrate women's joyful embrace of her oppression through the creation of her sexual response. Sexologists...dedicated their lives to eliciting orgasms from women in order to prevent our liberation" (Anticlimax 2). But Loy saw revolution in "sexual liberation". Adopting the Social Purity line, as Jeffreys does, means agreeing women are effectively helpless, subjugated by their own bodies. Instead, Loy believes women are oppressed only by society's attitudes towards sex and love. She makes this point clearly in the opening stanza of her long poetic sequence *Songs to Joannes*:

> Spawn of Fantasies
> Silting the appraisable
> Pig Cupid his rosy snout
> Rooting erotic garbage
> "Once upon a time" (Lost 53)

The clinical intervention of the sexologists in the heterosexual relationship, in an attempt to clinch romantic dependency in the creation of sexual response, is an attempt to trap women with "erotic garbage". "Once upon a time" refers to the romantic mythology of love which the speaker tries to escape in the sequence.

In the "Feminist Manifesto", Loy calls upon women to "destroy in themselves the desire to be loved" (155). As I have argued earlier, "the desire to be loved" was part of a mythology constructed to make women dependent on

men, to keep them from realizing their own intrinsic value as beings. "Love", and the service of gratitude for receiving "love", kept women locked in a patriarchal system of reproductivity which erased their own significance. Loy believed the only way to combat this reductive function of procreation was for women to reclaim their sexuality, to identify themselves as sexual beings. Acton wrote,

> the majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind....there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in the majority of cases in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all; and even if roused (which in many instances it never can be) it is very moderate compared with that of the male (Jeffreys, Debates 61).

Such beliefs allowed men to assert women's moral superiority (preferring "love" to men's desire for sex), but also underwrote a range of assumptions about women's weakness, delicacy, and appropriate deportment, thus ideologically maintaining patriarchal privilege. But if both sexes saw women as active participants in sex and sexuality, Loy believed, women could claim their status as equal partners in the relationship.[5] Rather than simply relegating women to the sentimental traditions of home, family and maternal love, men might come to regard women as competent, active participants in community and society.

Loy's attitude toward love is captured in a textual fragment called "Ladies in an Aviary", where Loy exposes "the sugar of fictitious values" (Last 316).[6] The "ladies" are caged like birds: "They are so lovely and they cannot get out." "The man who brings sugar to the cage" represents the patriarchal system whose values women are fed daily. "'Here is love,' cried the great strong man, ''tis a woman's whole existence[,]'" Loy ironically personifies patriarchy. Loy cynically shows how training has reduced "ladies" to their most base, animalistic state:

> There is a tremor of ribbon, a nasty sweep of feathers as inquisitive ladies, running to eat out of his hand, agitate these tassels of the soul in their impatience to be satisfied; and it is very wistfully that they recompose their ruffles on retiring.

Dependence on men for their care and feeding—crystallized in a lump of love—makes women into beasts, something less than human. Loy's critique is double-edged: she criticizes the patriarchal system for its entrapment of women, but she also criticizes women for allowing themselves to be kept as beautiful pets.

The way out of the trap, Loy suggests, is a displacement of "love" by sex. This is clearly revealed in the rare poem "There is no love alone":[7]

> There is no love alone
> love is an alloy
> love is not of the body
> love is of bodies

Love is a lyric
of bodies lying
in musical rhythm
with the cosmic duet

Love is a diamond daybreak
not of the stone
but of its shiny facets
awakening ecstasies (Last 233).

"Love", an alloy of emotion and orgasmic sexuality, is not an end in itself, but a new beginning. The poem's evocation of dawn recalls the Futurists' "New Day", the revolutionary moment. Loy believed a new sexuality was an essential component of the "new day". *Songs to Joannes* is an extended meditation upon this new sexuality and how, ultimately, it fails because the lovers cannot escape ideology.

Composed between 1915 and 1917, *Songs to Joannes* is one of Loy's most celebrated (and, incidentally, most vilified) works.[8] It is a sequence of thirty-four short poems, all written in free verse, or, more accurately, in Futurist verse, reflecting Marinetti's "parole in libertà". The diction is not traditionally poetic, and the lines are filled with bawdy puns. Rhyme is not entirely absent but seems almost accidental, and the rhythms of the lines are uneven—sometimes elegant and smooth, sometimes awkward and uncertain, sometimes terse and abrupt. The poems effectively form a lyric, but the

sequence is a defiant leap from the tradition of lyric poetry, both in style and subject matter.

"Joannes is probably a composite portrait of several male lovers. Some autobiographical clues point to Marinetti.... At other times, the figure seems to be modelled after Stephen Haweis...", Conover said of the poems in 1982 (Last 325). But with new biographical information available, Conover amends his opinion:

> In imaginative terms, "Joannes" is probably a figure collaged out of ML's failed relationship with several male lovers. In biographical terms he is most closely patterned after one—GP [Giovanni Papini] ("Joannes" translates to "Giovanni" in Italian). Following her fallout with GP...after an enthrallment that lasted over a year, ML confessed to [Carl Van Vechten]...that "love has calmed down to the thing that exists—'Joannes' is the most astounding creature that ever lived—in the light of my imagination....I believed he's really tried to forgive me...& I think he's a little jealous of Songs to Joannes—an unexpected effect—" (Lost 193).

Songs to Joannes is a sequence of intense complexity, the transformation of the theories of sexual liberation and free love to flesh, then back to word again. It is a searing, agonizing portrait of a destroyed relationship. Ideal Futurist sexuality is embodied in the speaker and her lover, but reveals itself to be a goal the Futurist himself cannot achieve. As Carolyn Burke puts it, "'Love Songs' asks, but cannot answer, the question of discord between the sexes" (Life 207). It is a thwarted attempt

to achieve personal enlightenment literally through orgasm.

The sequence opens with the image of "Pig Cupid" and immediately explodes in sexual frenzy:

> I would an eye in a Bengal light
> Eternity in a sky-rocket
> Constellations in an ocean
> Whose rivers run no fresher
> Than a trickle of saliva (I, 53).[9]

These sexual escapades "are suspect places", the unidentified speaker notes, leaving her trapped "in [her] lantern / Trimming subliminal flicker / Virginal to the bellows / Of Experience". Trapped within her cylinder of "Coloured glass", behind which her movements are diffuse and unclear, the now-wise virgin plots her escape.

The next poem finds the speaker observing "Something the shape of a man":

> The skin-sack
> In which a wanton duality
> Packed
> All the completion of my infructuous impulses (II, 53).[10]

Her appraisal of her lover's penis is frustrated by its "clock-work mechanism / Running down against time / To which I am not paced" (II, 54). She is unsatisfied; he has not learned her sexual rhythms. At the same moment, the speaker is also frustrated "from fretting your hair / A God's door-mat / On the threshold of your mind". She wants something beyond the sexual union; she seeks

emotional intimacy, a psychic spark. So far in the sequence, sex has not been the way to achieve this goal.[11]

The third poem suggests the situation the lovers are attempting to escape: an ordinary sexual tryst, a typical event in the historicity of men and women, suggested in the image of "a butterfly / With the daily news / printed in blood on its wings" (III, 54). Images of the sacred and profane, the transcendent and earth-bound, jostle in this section, suggesting a moment of imminent rupture from which something new might emerge. "We might have coupled / In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment", the speaker says conditionally, but they did not; she believes instead they have done something else, something radical. This radical departure is also seen in the fourth poem, where the speaker casts back to an image of her former self, part of "an unimaginable family / Birdlike abortions / With human throats / And Wisdom's eyes" (IV, 54). The speaker portrays herself in a ridiculously domestic, nineteenth-century image as a "goose". But before she can "teach them to tell me their secrets", she guesses the family's hidden treachery and "Sweep[s] the brood clean out".[12] This drastic gesture shows the speaker trying to escape "the abominable shadows" and live a life of self-determination.

Poem V reveals the speaker lost in a midnight street scene with Cupid, representing the classical traditional, "to the left" and "a haloed ascetic", representing Christianity, "to the right". Faced with these choices, and missing the guidance of her philosopher lover, the speaker does not know "which turning to take / Since you got home to yourself — first" (V, 55). The speaker tries to find her way through the dark mythologies of love—the romantic versus the spiritual—and is unable to find the path through the body, because her lover has withdrawn. She cannot discover a new "love" alone. The speaker feels "The wind [stuff] the scum of the white street / Into my lungs and my nostrils" (VII, 55-56). She is choked, suffocated, by an unsatisfying legacy of romantic love, represented by "Exhilarated birds / Prolonging flight into the night / Never reaching— — — — — — —". "Never reaching" the new intimacy she seeks in sexual climax, but also "Never reaching" the oft-promised "new day" of emancipated society, the Futurists' revolutionary promise.

For a brief moment, the speaker relaxes into pure carnality, brazenly portrayed in arresting diction, at once romantic, clinical and combative:

> When we lifted
> Our eye-lids on Love
> A cosmos
> Of coloured voices
> And laughing honey

And spermatozoa
At the core of Nothing
In the milk of the Moon

. . .

Shuttle-cock and battle-door
A little pink love
And feather are strewn (IX, X, 56).[13]

The speaker envisions "A cosmos"..."At the core of Nothing". "Nothing" represents multiply her allegedly absent woman's sexuality (she is not supposed either to have or enjoy sex); the absence of conception (this is an "infructuous" coupling and there is no biological union of the sperm and egg); and the demystified event of the sexual embrace.[14] The socially received "Nothing" will, the speaker hopes, actually be something substantial and meaningful, once torn from its romantic, sentimental trappings ("the milk of the Moon"). But immediately she is alarmed:

Dear one at your mercy
Our Universe
Is only
A colourless onion
You derobe
Sheath by sheath (XI, 56-57).

The relationship is a construct of the lovers, or maybe it is only so in the speaker's imagination. Its borders can be torn away at will, making the couple's "vegetable love" vulnerable to manipulation and disintegration. Perhaps the relationship, the speaker suddenly thinks, is

also, at its core, "Nothing", merely "A disheartening odour / About your nervy hands".

Poems XII, XIII and XIV form the heart of the speaker's optimistic philosophy. The speaker sees reason, in the form of "Voices" and words, "break on the confines of passion", rendering finite categories such as "Desire Suspicion Man Woman" (XII, 57). But passion is healed "in the humid carnage", where "Flesh from flesh / Draws the inseparable delight". [15] Sexual expression defies the analysis of logic and rationale, if we will so choose. But the speaker's optimism lasts only a moment, for she immediately asks,

> Is it true
> That I have set you apart
> Inviolate in an utter crystallization
> ...
> Or are you
> Only the other half
> Of an ego's necessity (XII, 57).

The speaker characterizes loving another as "scourging pride with compassion", suggesting the compromise of self romantic feeling implies. But there is a possible escape from the romantic compromise: "Something that has a new name / A new dimension" (XII, 57). The lovers are about to launch a radical enterprise, the speaker believes, and she ironically tells her lover,

> Let us be very jealous
> Very suspicious
> very conservative
> Very cruel

Or we might make an end of the jostling of
aspirations
Disorb inviolate egos (XIII, 58).

The proposition is to sacrifice the "inviolate ego"—the I—in exchange for new communion. After a line of long dashes, signifying perhaps a break or an unwritten reply, the speaker recants:

Oh that's right
Keep away from me Please give me a push
Don't let me understand you Don't realise me
Or we might tumble together
Depersonalized
Identical
Into the terrific Nirvana
Me you — you — me (XIII, 58).

The lover appears to resist the speaker's invitation to step into the new moment, and her bitter reply to his reluctance reveals she intends a much greater intimacy than merely the sexual union. "Don't realise me", she cries, voicing the central complaint of the sequence. The poems that follow all depend upon the lover being unable to "realise" the speaker.[16]

The speaker tries once more to reach the critical moment by offering her newly realized self to her lover:

Today
Everlasting passing apparent imperceptible
To you
I bring the nascent virginity of
— Myself for the moment (XIV, 58).

The lover does not recognize the intimacy the speaker craves. She does not want "love or the other thing"; she

longs to transcend these categories through a literal enlightenment ("the impact of lighted bodies / Knocking sparks off each other") into "chaos"—an absence of Law and Order. But her hope remains unfulfilled because "There was a man and a woman / In the way" (XXVII, 64): the speaker and her lover are trapped in their social categories.

The speaker sees how much easier it is to succumb to the romantic myth than to try to resist it:

> We might have lived together
> In the lights of the Arno
> Or gone apple stealing under the sea
> Or played
> Hide and seek in love and cob-webs
> And a lullaby on a tin-pan
>
> And talked till there were no more tongues
> To talk with
> And never have known any better (XVI, 59).

The speaker resigns herself to the fate a much larger force has determined for her. She is found once again in bed, but now it is transformed to a battlefield, where she lies bloody and spent:

> Red a warm colour on the battle-field
> Heavy on my knees as a counterpane
> ...
> Let the square room fall away
> From a round vacuum
> Dilating with my breath (XVII, 60).

Night falls for the speaker, trapping her in darkness, while her lover becomes the sun, travelling toward the noon of his "New Day" alone. "The moon is cold / Joannes"

(XXXII, 67), the speaker laments, "And I am burnt quite white / In the climacteric / Withdrawal of your sun" (XXVIII, 64). The speaker devolves from her revolutionary impulse. She identifies herself and her lover as plants ("Grass haulms", "shut-flower") and insects ("fireflies", "a green-lit glow-worm"). In the last few poems of the sequence, she rejects nature and evolution for creating generations who believe they might transcend genealogy:

> Evolution fall foul of
> Sexual equality
> Prettily miscalculate
> Similitude
>
> Unnatural selection
> Breed such sons and daughter
> As shall jibber at each other
> ...
> Let meeting be the turning
> To the antipodean
> And Form a blurr
>
> Anything
> Than seduce them
> To the one
> As simple satisfaction
> For the other (XXIX, 65-66).

Here, the speaker is bitterly ironic, almost cynical. She would prefer even mutants to the evolutionary "progress" toward sexual equality, because it ends in a battle of two "inviolate egos".

The speaker loses her humanity. She is reduced to a "thing"—"In ways without you / I go / Gracelessly / As things go" (XXII, 62), then a mere biological function:

> The procreative truth of Me
> Petered out

In pestilent
Tear drops
Little lusts and lucidities
And prayerful lies (XXIV, 62).

Eventually, she rejects the body entirely, turning the sex act into a mechanized performance:

Licking the Arno
The little rosy
Tongue of Dawn
Interferes with our eyelashes
— — — — — — — —
We twiddle to it
Round and round
Faster
And turn into machines (XXV, 63).[17]

The failing relationship leaves the speaker without human agency. She is reduced to a biological response to a stimulus, a reproductive mechanism only. Her lover's failure to realize the speaker as anything other than "Woman" reduces her to a category; his sun "Melts some of us / Into abysmal pigeon-holes" (XXV, 63). The speaker realizes the "Nucleus Nothing" she had once believed would liberate them is actually an "Inconceivable concept" (XXVII,63).

The sequence ends with a single line: "Love — — — the preeminent litterateur" (XXXIV, 68). The speaker realizes she is caught by the cultural trap of romantic love; even when she tries to escape it, her lover cannot (or will not), and the world around them will not permit the couple to escape. Love becomes merely a mythical story, craftily told.

Loy's attempt to liberate herself, within the poem, apparently fails. And yet the poem itself is an overwhelmingly successful step toward liberation, because for the first time ever in print, a woman had articulated an "explicit examination of intercourse, orgasm, bodily function, and sexual desire" (Lost 189). This success is particularly important when we consider the most comparable contemporary poem to *Songs to Joannes* was T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Burke remarks,

> 'Love Songs' holds in unresolved tension the desire for romantic love coupled with a critique of this same desire. ... 'Love Songs' resembled no known lyrics by female poets. ... Like other *vers librists*, Mina has to construct her form with material she had found inside herself (Life 202).

Although Loy could not achieve the freedoms she sought—freedom of action, freedom of emotion, and freedom from tradition—her ability to voice her experience, authentically, unapologetically, was just as important an accomplishment. DuPlessis observes, "The sex-radical woman may suffer the conventional narrative of passion and loss, thralldom and aftermath, but she will rewrite that narrative by rebounding to analyze" (198). The "rebounding to analyze" forms the important difference in Loy's writing. Bürger says,

> In Aestheticism, the social functionless of art becomes manifest. The avant-gardiste artists counter such functionless not by an art that would have consequences within the existing society, but rather by the principles of the sublation of art in the praxis of life (51).

Loy pushes Bürger's definitions of "society" and "life" relentlessly to include women and women's sexuality in the normally male "social praxis", thus creating an avant-garde art "with consequences". Not only does Loy desire to change how art functions in society; she longs to overthrow the fundamental constitution of that society to include women's vision for the first time.

Loy was ultimately unable to achieve revolution through orgasm in *Songs to Joannes*, but she firmly believed the body was the route to emancipation. In "Parturition", Loy posits the birthing body as an emancipatory organ: the "climax in sensibility" achieved in hard labour creates a radical rupture through which a woman brings herself into revolutionary discourse. Roger Conover remarks,

> As the putative first poem ever written about the physical experience of childbirth from the parturient woman's point of view, and the first poem in English to use collage as a texturing device, 'Parturition' is a significant event in the history of modern poetry as well as the literature of modern sexuality (Lost 177).

"Parturition" is indeed a "significant event", much more so than Conover suggests; for in it, Loy attempts to sever the ties of woman's libidinal body from the male political economy. The woman's self is realized and defined in the process of giving birth, in the struggle

to release the being within her: she is not merely a vessel emptied in giving birth, but a creator who asserts her own expressive potential. In this moment of potential obliteration, the speaker realizes a moment of revolutionary breakthrough.

Motherhood was a problematic topic for Loy. She believed "Every woman has a right to maternity", regardless of her age, class or marital status. Claiming this right was significant but troubled, because society was quick to ostracize the woman who bore a child outside of marriage. But it was also troubled because maternity was not a topic for public discussion. All stages of pregnancy, particularly childbirth, were silenced in public discourse. No one wrote about giving birth, although there are thousands of images of beatific mothers smiling gentle over their newborns. Mothers were silent. They might be written about, but they did not themselves write. The silence was radically interrupted when Loy published "Parturition", announcing again and again "I am" mother, creator, and, most importantly, woman.

"Parturition" has frequently been read either as a metaphoric examination of the emerging creativity of the woman artist or as an assertion of the woman's libido in a moment of potential nullity. Rereading this poem as a revolutionary manifesto of the class-consciousness of

women across the world will allow us to see it as an avant-garde tract exhorting the woman *labourer* to seize her revolutionary potential from the evolutionary impulse.

Loy believed women had endless potential. The "Aphorisms on Futurism", written at about the same time as "Parturition", suggest in "universal" language some of the themes Loy investigates in the poem. In the "Aphorisms", Loy announces the Self as the path to liberation:

> BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as a Universe"
> ...
> LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create
> UNSCREW your capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life—Whole (Lost 149-151).

But at this point, she speaks of a universal subject, of "Man" representing male and female consciousness alike. Loy's feminist commitment helped her realize men and women did not share the same consciousness and did not need the same awakening. "Parturition", then, functions almost as a companion piece to the "Aphorisms on Futurism", showing the actual process of "the Universe flow[ing] into your consciousness"—except the awakening is strictly a woman's.

Like the "Aphorisms", "Parturition" is composed using the aggressive tactics of Futurist poetry, particularly onomatopoeia, which effectively supports the subject matter. Burke notes, "Loy...worked out a compact, compressed free verse line that could simulate the rhythmic contractions and expansions of labor" ("New Poetry" 53). Loy lost unnecessary punctuation, breaking lines and thoughts with spaces and dashes. She inserted startling nouns and verbs, omitted weak adjectives and adverbs. Most importantly, she tried to sensualize the presentation of the page to embody its subject: "...she approached the blank page as if it were a canvas: a visual medium in which to recreate the inner space of the female body" ("New Poetry" 53). The poem's subject matter adapts readily to a Futurist treatment, for it recounts a moment of shattering, of overthrow and demolition. And yet it adopts these tactics in a slyly subversive way, too, exactly because of its subject:

> Something in the delirium of night-hours
> Confuses while intensifying sensibility
> Blurring spatial contours
> So aiding elusion of the circumscribed
> That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast
> Comes from so far away
> And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth
> Is no part of myself (7).

Bursting and breaking were typical Futurist tropes. But bursting with creative immanence, rather than merely a destructive impulse, is an immensely more radical act

than simply tearing down tradition; such an act accomplishes this and much more. The Futurists called for an artistic praxis that could perform revolutionary work. In "Parturition", Loy believed she had found exactly the perfect creation: giving birth as performance art.[18]

In the "Feminist Manifesto", Loy critiques the limited roles available to women:

> the division of women into two classes the mistress, & the mother every well-balanced & developed woman knows that is not true, Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are no restrictions

Loy rejected the belief that women's role is limited to the service of men's pleasure and production. These roles, "the mistress & the mother", are formed simply to control women and are socially reinforced in attitudes about women's bodies, sex, pregnancy, and "love". "The complete woman" Loy writes about is one who has rejected these reductive roles and reasserted her claim to her sex: her vagina. The "well-balanced & developed woman" realizes that her vagina is neither a plaything nor a factory for the male owner; indeed, the vagina is the anatomical weapon with which women can wage class warfare.

The vagina anatomizes the capitalist metaphor of in/out. In traditional male-female relations, the vagina receives the penis and the semen and eventually expels the child. It is, in this view, merely a receptacle for

the male's casual capital deposit; it is entirely disposable and interchangeable, much like any exploited worker alienated from her labour. The poem's speaker suggests this in the image of husband, who is absent from his wife's parturition because he is seeing another woman:

> A fashionable portrait painter
> Running up-stairs to a woman's apartment
> Sings
> "All the girls are tid'ly did'ly
> All the girls are nice
> Whether they wear their hair in curls
> Or—"
> At the back of the thoughts to which I permit
> crystallization
> The conoêption Brute
> Why? (5)

Why? Because to this sort of male thinking, one woman is as good as any other, because they are only valued for their anatomical function. And the ability to interchange women creates its own ideological justification:

> The irresponsibility of the male
> Leaves woman her superior Inferiority
> He is running upstairs (5).

The wife no longer holds sexual interest for her husband as she makes the transit from "mistress" to "mother"; he finds another "mistress" whose sexuality he can exploit.

Loy asserts that the parturient body is indeed a sexual body, despite the beliefs of the medical establishment:

> As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband's embraces, but principally to gratify him; and, were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions (Debates 62).

Far from being desexed in the delivery, childbirth is the ultimate orgasm. Burke notes, "It has been a well-kept secret even into our own time that the most intense moments of childbirth may result in an orgasmic experience of self" ("Becoming Mina Loy" 148). Loy suggests this in the poem's central lines:

> There is a climax in sensibility
> When pain surpassing itself
> Becomes Exotic
> And the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and negative
> poles of sensation
> Uniting the opposing and resisting forces
> In lascivious revelation (5-6).

The "climax in sensibility" is the explosive revolutionary moment, an instant where birthing, orgasm, and reclamation unite in the speaker's consciousness.

The speaker is supposed be exhausted (in the sense of being used up, as well as being tired) giving birth:

> Relaxation
> Negation of myself as a unit
> Vacuum interlude
> I should have been emptied of life
> Giving life (6).

She draws from her subconscious images of "A dead white feathered moth / Laying eggs" and "a cat / With blind kittens / Among her legs" (6,7). But in being "absorbed

into" the biological, animal process of birthing, the speaker simultaneously absorbs these images. "I am knowing / All about / Unfolding", she realizes, referring to a process of opening and releasing, consuming and recreating, rather than being consumed or exploited. Childbirth becomes enabling instead of exhausting, negating; it is a sublime moment. No longer is the speaker "the false quantity / In the harmony of physiological potentiality" (4); rather, "the female subject is released from dependence upon the male into an unbounded knowledge of female libido, a 'lascivious revelation'" (Burke, "The New Poetry" 53).

At the conclusion of the poem, the speaker remarks ironically,

> I once heard in a church
> —Man and woman God made them—
> Thank God (8),

completely dismantling patriarchal assumptions. "God", as the poem proves, did not make "Man and woman"; a woman did. A woman, therefore, transcends the man-made "God" in achieving union with her self. "God" can no longer hold women in subjugation; only men do, and women now have the means to overthrow this oppression. This realization is achieved at the paradoxical crux of the poem:

> Mother I am
> Identical
> With infinite Maternity
> Indivisible
> Acutely

I am absorbed
Into
The was—is—ever—shall—be
Of cosmic reproductivity (7)

At the moment the speaker is being physically and psychically torn apart, she achieves utter emancipation and liberation as a revolutionary labourer—not in her reproductive potential, but in her ability to overcome that biological functionalism through a new-found awareness.

Suleiman speaks of "the breathing and the speech that comes when censorship over the body is lifted; it also suggests strong emotion, labor, or passion, in all of which one 'breathes hard'" (128)[19]. We recognize the exultation in the rhythms of "Parturition"—the release from oppression, both biological and ideological, in the awakening of a revolutionary consciousness. In "Parturition", Loy achieves a literal revolution as a *labourer*. She seizes her means of (re)production (her body and, specifically, her reproductive organs) and takes control of it with an emancipated consciousness. In the romantic tradition, the always-offstage birth focusses on the product—the baby. Loy does not mention the baby at all but, rather, maintains her work, her labour, as the focus of the poem. She is not ultimately alienated from her labour, even as she feels herself torn

from herself in some passages. This is an explosive process: simultaneously orgasmic and revolutionary.

Thus, recognizing the "faculty for expressing herself through all her functions" is exactly like creating revolutionary consciousness in the working classes. Engels had identified years earlier that "the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male" (129). Loy smashed this oppression to pieces with her "Wrench".

Contrary to the medical and domestic discourses of the nineteenth century, Suleiman writes that the "maternal metaphor...enabled a number of French women writers to imagine a feminist avant-garde practice that would retain the historical avant-gardes' subversive/parodic energy but would revise and critique their negative attitude toward women..." (167). But decades earlier, in 1914, Loy had seized not only the metaphor but the literal birthing as a radical, revolutionary practice which, once released, could never again be contained.

Conclusion - Breakthrough: The Language of Attack

In 1997, Mina Loy remains one of the least-known, least-studied writers of the Modernist period, yet was the one who showed the greatest promise. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot both admired and wrote about her poetry. Yvor Winters predicted Mina Loy would be one of the most influential voices of her era—even of the whole twentieth century. Like Djuna Barnes, Loy deliberately avoided fame ("it is necessary to stay unknown", she reputedly said). Like Laura Riding, Loy's work is hard and uncompromising. And like Gertrude Stein, Loy was radically outside of her time. These qualities that made her such an exceptional figure in Modernism have largely obscured her accomplishment for later audiences. Once we understand what she aimed to accomplish with what I have called "the language of attack", however, I believe we will begin to restore Loy to her place as one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century.

I began this thesis by categorizing Mina Loy as a "lost Modernist" and have throughout referred to her artistic strategies as "avant-garde". Loy wrote at a critical moment in the history of English literature, a moment when art had become largely isolated from the rest of society. Two different impulses informed the debate: one, that art should remain isolated and elitist; the other, that art should be "integrated into the praxis of

life" (Bürger 54). Thus, the Modernist period is characterized by tensions between a movement to transform artistic production from an aesthetic to a political agenda (the avant-garde), and an equal and opposite resistance to such a movement (the rest of Modernism).

Avant-garde is often thought of as a term interchangeable with *Modernist*; or, at least, the avant-garde is viewed as a subset of the larger Modernist protest. Schulte-Sasse says,

> The equation of the two terms stems from an inability to see that the theoretical emphases of modernist and avant-garde writers are radically different. If the artistic strategies of modernism and the avant-garde could be reduced to strategies of purely linguistic negation, one might be justified in attempting to articulate an all-inclusive theory of modernism....If we focus on the precarious *status* of art in modern societies—the "institution" of "art"—we can see the radical difference between the strategies of negation within modernism and within the avant-garde. Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art. The social roles of the modernist and the avant-garde artist are, thus, radically different (Bürger xv).

He remarks elsewhere, "...'high' literature's problematic status in commercial societies permeates its form. Such literature no longer refers positively to society by critically presenting norms and values, but rather attacks the ossification of society and its language in what amounts to intellectual guerilla warfare" (Bürger

xii). The literature of Modernism may thus be read as a literature of linguistic protest.

The dual characterization of Loy as both avant-garde agitator and Modernist genius poses for me neither a contradiction nor a paradox; rather, it points out that strict categories are only workable in theory. For a radical woman artist in the Modernist period such as Loy, who, I have argued, is doubly marginalized by her position in both the literary community and society at large, such duality was necessary to accomplish her work. It is, however, one of the factors that has made her recovery some eighty years later so difficult.

Mina firmly believed in the avant-garde impulse to retrieve art from its isolation and introduce it into everyday social praxis; this impulse is largely what attracted her to Futurism. In the essay "Gertrude Stein", Loy proposes the deinstitutionalization of art. "Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized nature that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time" (Last 297), she writes, suggesting the need to pull art out of its isolation. Loy sought to lend the vigour and dynamics of Modernism to a more encompassing enterprise:

> The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect in your eyes, your ears—and you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in some sort of frame or glass case or tradition. Modernism says: why not each one of us, scholar or bricklayer, pleasurably realize all that is impressing itself

> upon our subconscious, the thousand odds and ends which make up your sensory every day life? (Last 298).

Thus, for Loy, art equals living; reactionary Modernism did not appeal to her.[1] But Loy realized, from trying to negotiate Futurism and feminism simultaneously, there is no reason to assume the social praxis into which art is to be integrated will be either gender-liberated or sex-liberated. Bürger calls for such reintegration but diminishes the need for relevant social *content* in art; integration is all he demands. From observing the Futurists, Loy had seen that radical social content must also be present if the society is to be revolutionarily transformed—that is, a society may integrate art into its social praxis and still be politically reactionary.[2] Loy's project, then, was to propel avant-garde praxis into revolutionary change.

Loy recognized that the institution of English literature was male; perhaps not exclusively male, but so much so that the women involved in literary production were almost completely marginalized. This recognition forms the basis of her avant-garde-Modernist production. She would write, as a woman, with a Wrench, bringing specifically female interests to the male-dominated moment.

Mina Loy used herself, mind and body, as artistic material. Her choice to write doubly-voiced manifestos,

to create autobiographical fictions in her poems and name herself there anagrammatically, and to record the intimate observations of her life in aggressive, free-wheeling verse was not a limitation of either education or technique, but a deliberate revolutionary tactic to make her life into art and her art into life. Futurism gave her the aesthetic tools, feminism gave her the political will, and her life as a woman gave her the dangerous position from which to speak her language of attack.

But if this optimistic analysis of Loy's project is correct, why is Loy still unknown today? Perhaps it is because the politics of her art are too radical to be read alongside either her reactionary Modernist peers (Eliot et al.) or her avant-garde comrades. Loy thrust LIVING/LIFE, in all its warm, sticky, rushing, bursting urgency upon a cold, clinical, and largely sterile Modernist enterprise that was not prepared to accommodate her. She proposed a revolution that was too female, too sexual, too vital. Loy's vibrant enthusiasm and revolutionary energy were contained by the larger forces of Modernism, which were finally conservative, depersonalized, and emotionless. Loy does not emerge victorious in recent representations of Modernism because her fight was ultimately lost.

Mina Loy always spoke from the margin. As a woman artist, she was already inherently marginalized; but her choice first to embrace, then to repudiate, Futurism ensured she was always oppositional to one or another impetus of the Modernist complex. Loy's scathing dismissal of mainstream feminism ("Is that all you want?") and her own proposals for corporeal emancipation have prevented the feminist community at large from valourizing and reclaiming her. Her continual self-creation of persona and voice, her adoption of disguises and poses, her tactical femininity, and her refusal to contain "Mina Loy" have secured her a nearly unrecoverable status as an outsider. Yet, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, being an outsider was Mina's position of strategic advantage. Her doubly avant-garde impulse, combined with her emancipatory Modernist critique, permitted her to function as a complete artistic rebel, containable neither by the avant-garde nor the mainstream. There is no "either/or", no "is/not" with Loy; only a series of approaches: long dashes, whites spaces, and ellipses. Loy watched from beyond the boundaries, an outsider, a woman wielding her wrenching language of attack. Hers is an earnestly revolutionary praxis.

Loy's language of attack is revolutionary thought transmitted in writing praxis: form and content that

aggress and destroy the barriers of convention, taste and tradition:

> ...a Trojan verse—deliberately hijacking Victorian vocabulary and conceptual posturing in order to subvert the values and expose the mechanisms such constructions were meant to euphemize (Lost xv).

It is a diction devoid of sentimental connotation, rendered in concrete language where striking nouns and verbs, rather than an abundance of languid descriptors, do most of the work. It is an inscription of origins, purity and absolutes, both grammatically and conceptually. It is a "grunting" diction, neither composed "in the sequence of the musical phrase", nor conversational.[3] Its rhythms can be fluid and supple or awkward and ungainly—it is deliberately unbalanced and inconsistent. Most importantly, the language of attack insists upon a woman subject, a woman's perspective, a woman's voice.

Loy rejects symbolism and allegory because these figures depend upon tradition and education for nuance. Instead, she uses associative diction, much as Stein does, to create poetic effect. Burke notes, "Loy, a trained artist, knew that images were inherently unreliable and no more numinous with meaning than anything else....images could dissolve, shatter, break into their components, fade out, or prove unrecognizable from different angles of vision" (Limits of Imagism 40). Loy turned the instability of the image to her advantage.

She despised sentimentality and materially based romanticism, yet she also needed to shock, to shame, to arouse, and to enflame. To do so, she used the depersonalizing, objectifying forms of Futurist poetics, to create both a blunt visual space and an aggressive aural environment from which to launch her intellectual critique.

Loy employed the language of the body to create the language of attack. She say the words no one else dares, through the body, onomatopoetically. Her pages gasp, moan, scream, and cry, both textually and visually:

> Loy withheld traditional meter, rhyme, and syntax, and presented sex with the expediency of an invoice. She broke every rule on the page, made up her own grammar, invented her own words—even improvised her own punctuation (Lost xv).

Her absent end-stops and wide chasms of white space both within the lines and upon the page create marvellous aural effects and develop the ambiguity of Pound's "emotional- intellectual complex". But they also reflect confinement and release, tension and relaxation, the sensual rhythms of a woman's body.

Stein tackled language and discursive categories by dismantling the traditional understanding of perception and meaning. Loy's project was to tackle and reveal gender biases upon the linguistic battleground. Loy saw this as a necessary step to change people's way of thinking, as the writers who influenced her had done:

"...geniuses like Stein and Marinetti were already inventing the new forms that would literally change the minds of those who paid attention" (Life 161). Loy uses the language of attack to attempt a consciousness-raising similar to what the Futurists believed automation and technology would achieve and to what radicals like e.e. cummings and Gertrude Stein hoped for from formal experimentation.

Loy was not unpopular when she was writing, although she provoked extreme responses. But her decline is contiguous with Eliot's ascent in Modernism. It is only post-Eliot that Loy disappears—and, interestingly, now that Eliot's influence is waning, Loy is beginning to re-appear. Eliot might have appreciated some of Loy's work, but he could never have agreed with her revolutionary desires. There is content as well as form to Loy's poetry. Her speakers are fleshy, real, embodied, human; Eliot, on the other hand, proposed the "depersonalized" theory of poetry. Loy made poetry the site of personal revolutionary action.

Consider what Loy's contemporary critics disliked about her work:

> To Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedecker* [Edwin] Muir granted compromising approval. The author of "a very unequal, but an arresting" book of poetry, Mrs Loy [sic], Muir conjectured, was "good" when she was "not cerebral," not at all good when she was (Ford 49).

Similarly, William Carlos Williams characterized her as "slightly overcerebral" (Ford 49). Loy is remembered for her "un-ladylike" poetry: "She had great promise as a poet, [Carl Van Vechten] thought, if only she would stop writing about sex" (Lost xvi). Her contemporaries could not accept either her intelligence or her sexuality—or worse, the combination of both qualities. What challenges her readers, both contemporary and current, is her intellect, her frank discussion of sexuality, and her thoughtful revolutionary passion, all voiced in a relentlessly confrontational diction. When we try to recover her today, we must understand what her original readers found difficult about her; we must also realize these same aggressive irritants remain with us today.

"...[I]t is not easy for the average reader to 'get' Gertrude Stein, because for the casual audience entity seems to be eclipsed by excresence", Loy writes coyly, surely realizing that these words were also true of her own readers. Readers were and are unable to apprehend the fleshy immediacy of Loy's poetry, revealing as it does the integral centre—the utter core—of its subject, shearing away the outgrowths of sentiment. If Pound's "Mauberley" and Eliot's "Prufrock" were characterized by sterility, a lack of sexual energy and anesthesia, Loy was the antidote. She is vibrantly, vitally alive, actively embodied. In the context of Pound's absent

sexuality or Eliot's "do I dare?" gentility, Loy speaks the words unsaid—the words other poets cannot say.

Mina Loy creates a truly revolutionary, political art, one that undertakes the avant-garde integration of art into social praxis and simultaneously attempts to change the constitution of that very society. This is dangerous territory, yet Loy negotiated it ruthlessly, charging forward into the forces of opposition, using her female bodily poetics to utter the language of attack.

Notes to Introduction

[1] "Yvor Winters predicted that she and Williams would be the two most influential poets of the future" (*Women Poets* 498).

[2] In the "Introduction" to *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, Roger L. Conover notes, "'Difficult' is the word that has been most often used to describe her. Difficult as a poet and difficult as a person. And certainly difficult to place" (xiv).

[3] For example, Humphrey Carpenter's brief biographical sketch of Loy in *Geniuses Together: American Writers in Paris in the 1920s* gets most of the important facts correct (although he omits mentioning two of Loy's children and calls Fabienne "Jemima"), but glosses over her poetry, saying only,

> She occasionally published poems in the little magazines. Most of her friends thought them excessively cerebral, but they admired her "Brancusi's Golden Bird", printed in the *Dial* in 1922 opposite a photograph of the sculpture it described. She also wrote a neat little poem about Gertrude Stein.... William Carlos Williams says that the line from her poems that everyone remembered was "Pig Cupid, his rosy snout rooting erotic garbage" (101).

Carpenter does note, however, that "She dressed strikingly" (101).

[4] "Her first husband, Stephen Haweis, warned his wife... *Keep writing that way, Mina Haweis, and you'll lose your good name*" (Lost xvi; italics in original).

[5] Even the optimistically themed anthology *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now* (1992) closes its detailed, intensely sympathetic biography of Loy with the line, "When she died in 1966, Mina Loy's

disappearance was seemingly complete" (500). In the same year, John Ashbery, in the preface to a selection of Mary Butts' short stories, wrote, "A biography of Mary Butts is said to be on the way, but until it materializes, our knowledge of the person behind the fictions will remain tantalizingly slight" (*From Altar to Chimney-piece: Selected Stories*, viii). The biography has since appeared.

[6] In an article that lauds the publication of *Becoming Mina Loy* and *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, writer Larissa MacFarquhar dismisses Loy's work as no longer relevant, saying, "Read now, Loy's writing seems a little dated, but it's wonderful for precisely that reason. It explodes with an idol-smashing brave-new-world energy that reminds you of the exhilarating side of modernism" (92).

[7] For an expanded discussion of this history, see *Imagist Poetry*, pp. 14-19.

[8] "Parturition" was not actually Loy's first poem in print; "Café du Néant" was, having been published in August 1914 in *International: A Review of Two Worlds*. "Café" is a provocative poem, with lines such as these:

> Nostalgic youth
> Holding your mistress's pricked finger
> In the indifferent flame of the taper
> Synthetic symbol of LIFE
> In this factitious chamber of DEATH
> The woman
> As usual
> Is smiling as bravely
> As it is given to her to be brave (Lost 16),

but it could not have roused the response that Loy's unmistakably frank "Parturition" did. I will discuss "Parturition" in detail in Chapter Three.

[9] Pound's appreciation of Mina Loy and Marianne Moore is a disingenuous dismissal of their sex in the guise of valuing their intellect. Burke remarks,

> Pound's sponsorship of their poetry because of its intelligence—"the utterance of clever people in despair,...a mind cry, more than a heart cry"—is notable precisely because he seems to have ignored the fact that they were intelligent women, whose "logopoeia" was as gender-conscious as his own was gender-blind. Like Marinetti, Pound was sure that "intelligence" was coded "masculine," and for this reason, gender as an aspect of modernist poetics never suggested itself (Gender of Modernism 234).

Pound's comments seem to characterize Loy and Moore as spinsterly, asexual non-women, a position totally at odds with what Loy was trying to accomplish.

[10] Williams had a great deal to say about Loy, although little of it was about her poetry. For example, Williams describes Mina as "very English, very skittish, an evasive, long-limbed woman too smart to involve herself, after a first disastrous marriage, with any of us—though she was friendly" (quoted in Ford 49).

[11] Steven Watson includes a sketch of Marianne Moore by Mina in *Strange Bedfellows* (300). This sketch, which is exceptionally severe—perhaps unfinished?—suggests Mina's perceptions of the highly reserved Moore. Moore returned the favour by writing about Loy. "These Various Scalpels" pointedly asks,

Are they weapons or scalpels?
Whetted to brilliance
by the hard majesty of that sophistication which is superior to
opportunity,
these things are rich instruments with which to experiment.
But why dissect destiny with instruments
more highly specialised than components of destiny itself?
(Moore 51-52).

[12] Mina is remembered fondly in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Stein recounts giving *The Making of Americans* to Stephen Haweis and his wife, "later Mina Loy", saying, "Mina Loy equally interested was able to understand without commas. She has always been able to understand" (132).

[13] Burke's biography provides a richly detailed re-creation of Loy's young life; see *Becoming Modern*, pp. 13-64.

[14] Schulte-Sasse, in the "Foreword" to Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, notes,

> What the debate about modernism generally refers to as the writer's skepticism toward language and meaning since the mid-nineteenth century Bürger considers to be an increasing consciousness on the part of the artist of writing techniques, how material is applied, and its potential for effect....For Bürger, then, the development of the avant-garde has nothing to do with a critical consciousness about language; it is not a continuation of tendencies already present in Aestheticism. Rather, for him the turning point from Aestheticism to the avant-garde is determined by the extent to which art comprehended the mode in which it functioned in bourgeois society, its comprehension of its own social status (xiii-xiv).

[15] "Modernism may be understandable as an attack on traditional writing techniques, but the avant-garde can only be understood as an attack meant to alter the institutionalized commerce with art" (Bürger xv).

Notes to Chapter One

[1] For the publishing history of the manifesto and an analysis of its impact, see Jean-Pierre A. de Villers, *Le premier manifeste du futurisme* (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1986).

[2] Mina's father, Sigmund Lowy, was a Hungarian Jew who had emigrated to England in search of opportunity. According to Mina, "the Lowys had been wealthy members of the Jewish community in Budapest for more than a century before her birth" (Life 17), but this inheritance was lost when her grandfather, Adolph Lowy, married beneath his class and was disinherited. Sigmund was a tailor by trade, but established himself as a business-man; despite his origins, he was economically middle class. Religious bigotry, however, restricted his social progress in London. Mina's mother, Julia Bryan, was an artisan's daughter and a Protestant—"a Baptist, a Congregationalist or in one of the Methodist denominations" (Life 15). This mixed marriage was no slight source of stress in the Lowy household. Burke says, "In Mina's view her mother tried all her life to conceal both her husband's religion and the source of his income. Although Julia sometimes let it be known that he was 'connected with trade,' no one was allowed to mention what he did" (Life 16). This background suggests that class tensions were formative forces upon Mina's young life.

[3] Manifestos drove the movement. As new ideas were proclaimed within disciplines, they were declared in manifestos and taken up dialectically by artists in other forms.

[4] Burke writes, "Although Marinetti's program included *azione femminile* (a "feminine action" unrelated to the suffragists's

struggles), it was not clear whether any women played a part in the movement". (Life 161), but it is clear that at least a few women called themselves "Futurists". For a more complete list, see Lea Vergine, *L'autre moitié de l'avant-garde 1910-1940* (Paris: des femmes, 1982). The roster of "Futurist women" is constantly changing as new artists, especially in the former Soviet Union, are discovered. But importantly, although Loy exhibited as a Futurist visual artist, she is not included in Vergine's book, nor is she discussed in Blum's *The Other Modernism* (1996).

[5] Blum's critical re-examination of Futurism tries to deal with the involvement of women in the movement, but primarily considers women as a "problem" of Marinetti's Futurist goals.

[6] This novel features the characters Brontolivido (Marinetti), Johannes (Papini), and Jemima (Mina Loy). For further description, see Karen V. Peltier's paper "Mina Loy Papers YCAL MSS6".

[7] Blum disagrees with this assessment, saying, "Unlike expressionism, however, the futurist revolt against the establishment produced no radical social criticism and discouraged pessimism and alienation" (19). According to Poggioli, these factors are necessary to the formation of a true avant-garde. But according to Bürger, the Futurists are avant-garde because they sought to bring art back to life praxis. Bürger says,

> The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men [sic]. When the avant-garde demand that art become practical again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the

> contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society... (49).

It is in the 1920s, when the commitment to revolutionary art has fallen away, that the Futurist movement becomes fascist.

[8] Perloff discusses this topic at length in "The Manifesto as Art Form", pp. 80-115, in *The Futurist Moment*.

[9] A similar technique in poetry might be seen in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, poems which often employ typically "cubist" multiple perspectives and a continuous present tense to explore the domestic world.

[10] In discussing the Dadaists and Surrealists (with whom Loy shares important qualities), Bürger notes,

> It is no accident that both Tzara's instructions for the making of a Dadaist poem and Breton's for the writing of automatic texts have the character of recipes. This represents not only a polemical attack on the individual creativity of the artist; the recipe is to be taken quite literally as suggesting a possible activity on the part of the recipient. The automatic texts also should be read as guides to individual production. But such production is not to be understood as artistic production, but as part of a liberating life praxis. This is what is meant by Breton's demand that poetry be practiced (*pratiquer la poesie*). Beyond the coincidence of producer and recipient that this demand implies, there is the fact that these concepts lose their meaning: producers and recipients no longer exist. *All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best one can* (53; italics mine).

Loy's manifestos demonstrate this "character of recipes", and both her prose and poetry enact this same "coincidence of producer and recipient".

[11] In 1997, living after the advent of grunge typography, such treatment of type and composition hardly seems radical; but Futurism arose in the days when hand composition was still common and this kind of page design was difficult. At the same moment, books were (and continue to be) collected as precious commodities (e.g., William Morris' rich hand-bound editions, Yeats' Irish volumes, etc.). The age of the independent small-press was just beginning; it would reach its zenith in the mid-1920s.

[12] Bringhurst's sense of classical typography suggests everything the Futurists revolted against. He writers, "Typography with anything to say therefore aspires to a kind of statuesque transparency. Its other traditional goal is durability: not immunity to change, but a clear superiority to fashion" (17). See especially "The Grand Design", pp. 17-24, in *The Elements of Typographic Style*.

[13] The presentation of the "Feminist Manifesto" in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* is much closer to the Futurist ideal than in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (1982), where it was first published. The presentation of the text is integral to Loy's overall avant-garde program. Schulte-Sasse says,

> ...avant-garde artists were actively attacking the institution of art. The effort was not to isolate themselves, but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life. It is no accident that the active, even aggressive artistic manifesto—an address to fellow artists and society—became the preferred medium of expression for the avant-garde artist of the twentieth century (xxxvi).

A similar desire to reintegrate art into life exists in the praxis of the "Feminist Manifesto".

[14] "Loy's depression stretched back to her childhood, but it was exacerbated by her sour marriage (in 1903) to a philanderer, the death of their first child [Oda Janet] in infancy, and her dissatisfaction with living in what she considered a cultural backwater....She wrote to Carl Van Vechten, 'Most of my time I spend in utter aloneness—among moving crowds—that gives me the real fillips of Being'" (Watson 89-91).

[15] It is ironic the "Feminist Manifesto", one Loy's strongest works, was not published during her lifetime. I have been unable to determine why it was not published, except that Loy did not have the wealth—as did, say, Mabel Dodge—to self-publish. According to Carolyn Burke, Mabel Dodge is the only one of Loy's peers we can be certain read the "Manifesto" in draft form; its circulation elsewhere in manuscript is not mentioned in any of the literature I have reviewed. Perhaps Mabel discouraged Mina from publishing it; or perhaps Mina was unnerved by the potential public response to her revolutionary demands.

[16] I will discuss the "Feminist Manifesto" in greater detail in Chapter Two.

[17] Following her formal break from Futurism, Loy adopted "internationalist" politics, according to Burke. Loy also renounced violence and became a pacifist after the conclusion of World War One.

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Djuna Barnes, however, does use the phrase on Loy's behalf in *Ladies Almanack*, in the voice of Patience Scalpel, who remarks of the lesbian women she watches "gamboling on the Greensward" and "welded without Flame, in one incalculable Embrace", "they have come to a

blind Alley; there will be no children born for a season, and what matter it?" (11-12).

[2] Watson neatly summarizes the "free love" doctrine:

> According to this doctrine, sexual relationships (or *free unions*) should not be restricted to married couples but enjoyed by any mutually consenting parties no matter what their marital state. Free love advocates distinguished their activity from promiscuity, describing the sexual impulse as a form of spiritual enhancement. Hutchins Hapgood lauded it as "the *higher sex companionship* that every conscious soul desires, and that is one of the few connecting links of the human with the divine." ("Cristine," p. 98) Randolph Bourne called it *human sex*, "which is simply a generic name for those whose masculine brutalities and egotisms and feminine prettiness and stupidity have been purged away so that there is left stuff for a genuine comradeship and healthy frank regard and understanding" (144).

[3] In the 1910s, Loy was still working out her beliefs and philosophy. She is not always consistent. Also, Loy was an artist turned writer and did not think of herself as a revolutionary leader. Other radicals—Emma Goldman in particular—came forward with much more aggressive, more populist ideas, but as I will argue later in the thesis, Loy's strategies were intended to accomplish particular work within particular social groups.

[4] An examination of the poems in the section "Futurism x Feminism" in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* reveals that Mina's poetry in the 1910s—the most volatile period of literary Modernism, as with the rest of the world—is almost exclusively focussed on relations between men and women.

[5] Regrettably, the "Feminist Manifesto" was not published until 1982 in *The Last Lunar Baedeker*. Although we can read the feminism articulated in her poetic observations through the "Manifesto", the poems were her only contemporary public statements. It is intriguing to speculate what public response to the publication of the "Manifesto" at the time of its writing—the beginning of the First World War—would have generated.

[6] What Engels proposes here is revolutionary, given his anthropological method of arriving at the proposal. In *The Origin of the Family*, Engels examines the co-evolution of marriage forms and property rights, from group marriage and communal ownership to matrilineal relations to patriarchal inheritance. Engels' proposal would disrupt a fundamental means of property exchange in capitalism.

[7] When Watson describes feminism from the perspective of the "New Bohemia on Washington Square", he inadvertently reveals the inherent bias of the mainstream movement:

> Although the feminist movement encompassed supporters of women's right to vote, called *suffragists*, feminists attempted *to improve women's position in all aspects of life, not just politics*. They were sometimes called *Heterodites*—after the women who joined Heterodoxy, a women's club in the Village—or more popularly the *New Women*. The prototypical New Woman supported everything from practical clothes and birth control to progressive education and sexual parity with men. H.L. Mencken used the term flapper to describe the New Woman in 1915, although the term didn't become popular until the 1920s. The New Women's opposite was dubbed the parasite woman, because she was dependent on men (143-144).

Regrettably, "parasite women" outnumbered "New Women" by a huge ratio (in 1917, Loy's profile as a "New Woman" marked her as unusual,

outlandish), and the change accomplished by "New Women" was more discursive than real.

[8] Virginia Woolf symbolically burned the word "feminist" in her book *Three Guineas*, trying to rid it of its associations. The event is portrayed with a strongly ironic tone:

> What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word 'feminist' is the word indicated....Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper. Look, how it burns. What a light dances over the world!...The smoke has died down; the word is destroyed. Observe, Sir, what has happened as the result of our celebration. The word 'feminist' is destroyed; the air is cleared; and in that clearer air what do we see? Men and women working together for the same cause (117).

Woolf approaches feminism from a very different perspective than Loy. Indeed, in this passage, she is in some ways mocking the avant-garde work of writers like Loy, whose impulse is to destroy the received. But Woolf's gesture reflects a conflict with reductive labelling, which Loy would likely have approved.

[9] For an in-depth discussion of the effects of reform movements upon working-class families, see Linda Mahood, *Policing Gender, Class and Family: Britain, 1850-1940* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1995).

[10] The presence of a working-class suffrage movement has been largely under-reported and is now generally overshadowed by the efforts of the WSPU and the NUWS; but the movement's contribution to a broad national awareness of women's issues in England, particularly for the women in smaller urban centres and isolated rural areas, should not

be underestimated. See Jill Liddington and Jill Norris, *One Hand Tied Behind Us* (London: Virago, 1978).

[11] "Coined in 1915 by Margaret Sanger, the term [birth control] was a progressive alternative to family limitation, which had emphasized the reproductive function within a conventional marriage. Both terms were considered radical by the U.S. Post Office" (Watson 143).

[12] This point is not to diminish the real accomplishment of these goals. But it is necessary to point out that "rights" are class and gender determined; they are not inherent in the individual, and one's "rights" are often achieved at the cost of another's. Important as goals such as suffrage and access to employment might be, Loy believed revolution, rather than simple reform, was required to achieve true "equality" of the sexes.

[13] "Redundant women"—a term actually used in this period—were a problem for decades in England, where the ratio of women to men had been badly disproportionate since the mid-1800s.

[14] Recall Watson's assertion that the phrase "parasite woman" was current at the time Loy was writing.

[15] This radical notion that children should be the communal responsibility of society, and not individual parents, would be revisited almost a century later by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case of Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1970). Unfortunately, few other activists or critics have attempted to argue this case.

[16] Loy, strongly heterosexual, does not discuss sexuality outside the male-female paradigm. Yet she doesn't seem to be anti-lesbian either. Perhaps Djuna Barnes has her correctly characterized as Patience Scalpel:

> ...from Beginning to End, Top to Bottom, inside and out, she could not understand Women and their Ways as they were about her, above her and before her...."And what," she said, "the silly Creatures may mean by it is more than I can diagnose! I am of my Time my Time's best argument, and who am I that I must die in my Time, and never know what it is in the Whorls and Crevices of my Sisters so prolongs them to the bitter End?" (Almanack 11).

Perhaps, optimistically, Loy felt the lesbian was outside the patriarchal economy and did not need emancipating. Or perhaps, more typically, the lesbian is just absent in Loy's work.

[17] Loy's critique implies that other social institutions would need also to change to accommodate the new order, but, unfortunately, the structures for accomplishing this change are not spelled out in the "Manifesto".

[18] See "On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy and Hysteria in Females" and "On Some Diseases of Woman Admitting Surgical Treatment" in *The Sexuality Debates*, Sheila Jeffreys, ed. (New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 11-41.

[19] There is a distinct difference between clitoridectomy (excision of the clitoris and labia) and the surgical destruction of virginity (rupturing the hymen with a scalpel), in that one reinforces patriarchal authority and one subverts it. Clitoridectomy in Anglo-American culture is used pathologically to control or even eliminate women's sexual response. The surgical destruction of virginity, in feminist praxis, both symbolically and actually disrupts the commodification of women's sexual experience; that is, it renders her exchange-value or "bride price" valueless—but not worthless.

[20] "Dots" refer to "marriage portions" or dowries, from French.

[21] Futurism appears to be one of Loy's own blind alleys—something apparently leading somewhere, then stopped short. In my analysis, however, Loy's flirtation with Futurism was beneficial because it brought her to a site of avant-garde praxis. Her marginalization as a woman and feminist within Futurism only strengthened her attack.

[22] "The Prototype" is one of Loy's earliest poems and betrays some of her latent assumptions. Today's readers may find some of its lines troubling; for example, she describes the waxen baby Christ as "Perfect in pink-&-whiteness, in blue- / eyedness, in yellow-silk-curledness", an apparent critique of the dominance of Anglo-Saxon imagery. But the poem concludes with a plea for the establishment of a new gospel, and the speaker asks "And let their babies be / pink and white". See *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, pp. 221-222.

[23] We can also see Loy's emerging interest in Christian Science in this poem.

[24] "Mina told her daughters that she first thought of using Loy in Munich, where she had seen the name on a shop window: in Paris, she was now asserting, however ironically, that she would be a law (*loi*) unto herself. She would soon invent another version in which the letters *L*, *O*, and *Y*, formed her insignia, and, throughout her life, would rearrange this self-appellation in anagrams and other verbal disguises" (Life 97).

[25] Bürger considers the issue of the signature in art and concentrates on Marcel Duchamp's signed "Readymades" which "[unmask] the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work..." (52). Loy's adoption of a new name, inscribed both on and in

her works, may perform a similar distortion of valuing the work apart from the artist, a practice the avant-garde was trying to overcome.

[26] Most critics who have written on Loy agree that autobiography is important in Loy's work, but it must not be read as straight confession: Loy is much too cautious to make herself so vulnerable.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] With the phrase "where sex lies", I mean to evoke a deliberate ambiguity of understanding—i.e., where sex "lies" in the sense of telling untruths; in the sense of being found (amidst the mythology of romantic love and clinical science of physiology); and in the sense of coming to rest or being centred.

[2] Here I have deliberately chosen a range of writers to reflect numerous different historical moments and perspectives upon sexuality. By invoking these names, I do not intend to align Loy with any particular stream of thought; rather, I mean to suggest how the discourse of women's sexuality has emerged and developed in the second half of this century.

[3] Jeffreys represents the late twentieth-century version of "Social Purity" feminism—unfortunately, little has changed in eighty years.

[4] Although this book concentrates on the American situation, the same trends were occurring in Europe, and England in particular.

[5] Today, Loy would probably be criticized on this point as a liberal humanist or perhaps as a bourgeois feminist (which, by birth, she was). Singling out elements of Loy's early feminism does not do justice to the range and depth of her thinking, particularly when considered alongside her later work in the Bowery or read against the life she actually lived. I would suggest Loy be regarded, within her context of 1913-1919, much as we consider "sex radicals" like Suzy

Bright, Kathy Acker, and Pat Califia today. This is a problematic position, certainly, but Loy earnestly believed, much as these women do, in the emancipatory potential of unfettered sexuality. Loy was not a strong theorist; we must derive most of our understanding of her beliefs from her artistic production alone.

[6] Roger Conover, the volume editor, assigned this title.

[7] This poem has only been published once, in *The Last Lunar Baedeker*. I have found no criticism discussing it.

[8] Conover notes that Alfred Kreymborg, Mina's editor at *Others*, where "Love Songs" was published, "described the 'violent sensation' that ML's 'Love Songs' created: her 'clinical frankness and sardonic conclusions, wedded to a madly elliptical style scornful of the regulation grammar, syntax and punctuation...drove our critics into furious despair....The utter nonchalance in revealing the secrets of sex was denounced as nothing less than lewd. It took a strong digestive apparatus to read Mina Loy...'" (Lost 189). Along the same lines, Burke notes, "The influential Amy Lowell had threatened to withdraw her support of *Others* because of 'Love Songs' and had let it be known that she despised Mina's poetry" (Life 191).

[9] I have chosen to use *Songs to Joannes* as published in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* as the source text for this section. As editor Roger Conover discusses at length in his notes to the poem, this choice is somewhat problematic, but I agree with Conover that it is probably closest to Loy's intended text. Prior to 1996, the poem was generally referred to as "Love Songs to Joannes" or "Love Songs"; earlier texts possess minor editorial variations from Conover's 1996 edition, but are similar enough for valid comparisons. Citations list the poem number and corresponding page number in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*.

[10] DuPlessis observes, "...'wanton duality' is not simply an abstract portrait of his genitalia, but of her double impulse toward

licentious, rebellious sex and desire for male fertilization". With the phrase "male fertilization", DuPlessis introduces an interesting ambiguity. She means "fertilization" by the male, but her words suggest the potential for the speaker to fertilize (in the sense of embellishing, improving, preparing for growth) her lover psychically and intellectually, the line of argument I am taking up.

[11] The unfolding of my discussion implies a narrative thread which is not supported by the poem itself; indeed, as Burke notes, "There is no lyric voice, no actors or actions, no complete or completeable statements" (Life 203). My logic generally follows the sequence of the poems themselves, but by no means is this strictly linear or chronological.

[12] This poem has particularly strong hints of Mina's domestic life in Florence and is likely one that Roger Conover reads as indicating that "she may have miscarried or aborted a child by SH [Stephen Haweis]" (Lost 185).

[13] Here the feathers evoke both Cupid, the winged holy child of poem V, and the "Ladies in an Aviary" discussed above.

[14] One of Loy's younger friends was dismayed by the invocation of "Nothing": "Frances Stevens, who had informed Mina of the Sanger scandal, wrote to say that 'there are some of us over here...who won't believe "thats" all Love is,' Mina told Mabel, adding that Frances was having 'virginal hysterics.' 'Of course "thats" all nothing and yet "thats" all it is,' Mina observed. Any more was 'spiritual effervescence'" (Life 179).

[15] The line "the humid carnage" is easily read to refer to the "battle of the sexes" as enacted in bed, and given what we know about attitudes toward sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this reading is apt. Burke argues persuasively for a

"human carnage" reading as well, situating *Songs* as "a peculiar kind of war poetry" (Life 208). I would propose another reading: the sexually engaged couple as an attack upon the limits of convention and propriety. In "O Hell", Loy writes "Our person is a covered entrance to infinity / Choked with the tatters of tradition", suggesting that the body is the means by which to escape society's moral oppression. I want to propose the lovers united in a revolutionary embrace, in the speaker's perspective; regrettably, this gesture is not sustained by the events of the poem.

[16] That is, to see her as a whole rather than merely a hole, to put it crassly.

[17] This explicit rejection of both the romantic tradition of rosy dawn and the Futurist machine is probably a biographical trace of Papini.

[18] Burke notes "Mina...ridiculed Marinetti's desire to bear his own children" (Life 171). Perhaps this poems is also a satirical attack upon his thwarted desire.

[19] Here Suleiman is actually describing Cixous' text *Souffles*, but the description is fitting. One of the frustrating aspects of Suleiman's otherwise valuable book is that she repeatedly overlooks Mina Loy, although she could potentially invoke her many times (particularly as a manifesto writer; see *Subversive Intent*, p. 17).

Notes to Conclusion

[1] In the essay "Modern Poetry", T.S. Eliot, whose works Loy would certainly have known, is strikingly absent from her survey of modern poets (which does include Pound, Cummings, Williams, Moore, H.D., and a couple of now-lost names, Lawrence Vail and Maxwell Bodenheim); is it Eliot at whom she hints when she writes "It will be found that one can recognize each of the modern poets' work by the gait of their

mentality" (Lost 157)? Perhaps she found his Symbolist-inspired free-verse couplets stodgy and Old World compared to the other Americans' works.

[2] Walter Benjamin discusses this point at length with particular regard to the Futurists and their evolution into fascism. See "The Work of Arts in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", pp. 217-251, in *Illuminations*.

[3] It was recently pointed out to me that Loy's poetry contains an unusual number of short-u sounds, rendering many of her phrases very "ugh-ly".

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